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The Year of the Yield

One day of that glorious, unforgettable summer in the early Twenties when the earth had forgotten the feel of rain, and London drowsed in a golden haze, fate played a vital part in the lives of four people. On that day Mr. Ellis, fiftyish, single, and at the crossroads of life, brooding on a bench in Regent's Park, found a purpose in his hitherto purposeless existence. For he was able to help, in the most practical way, Mrs. Betterton-Best, the charming widow who had sat down on the same bench to ponder her own, seemingly insoluble, problems.

Moving from London to Monte Carlo and then to Venice, Mr. Ellis becomes more and more involved in the affairs of Mrs. Betterton-Best. First there is the problem of a gentleman posing as a wealthy Italian prince who had once shared with her a most happy liaison. The unmasking of this impersonator leads to an invitation from the head of the late prince's family to visit Venice, where the help of Mrs. Betterton-Best is solicited to save the family's good name. In this she is completely successful, not only in the accomplishment of her task, but in ensuring the happiness of Mr. Ellis and her own future comfort.

Miss Cost has written a charming love story with a delightful period flavour of the Twenties, told with all the craftsmanship for which she has long been known.

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RACHEL

THE DARK STAR

THE DARK GLASS

A MAN NAMED LUKE

The Year of the Yield

MARCH COST



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To
JOHN FRANCIS MARION
in remembrance of his notable
Count Rumford researches

Contents

PART I

Page

1	SUMMER CRISES 1921	3
2	MR. ELLIS'S LULL	10
3	MR. ELLIS'S STORM, MORNING	28
4	MR. ELLIS'S STORM, AFTERNOON	44
5	MR. ELLIS'S STORM, EVENING	49
6	MR. ELLIS'S STORM, NIGHT	53
7	MR. ELLIS'S AFTERMATH	60

PART II

8	MRS. BETTERTON-BEST'S LULL	65
9	MRS. BETTERTON-BEST'S STORM, EVENING	79
10	MRS. BETTERTON-BEST'S STORM, NIGHT	89

PART III

11	EDWARDIAN INTERLUDE, 1901-1912	97
12	RENDEZVOUS IN REGENT'S PARK, 1921 . . .	138
13	VENETIAN ASSIGNMENT	146
14	MONTE CARLO ENCOUNTER	159
15	SAN REMO SIESTA	171
16	VENETIAN DILEMMA	177
17	DUCAL DISCLOSURES	193
18	THREE TRAVEL	206
19	LONDON TRYST	216
20	GEORGIAN AFTERNOON	225

*For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into
a good land . . . a land whercin thou shalt
not lack anything in it.*

Part I

I. Summer Crises 1921

During the heatwave summer of 1921, in London and Venice, four habitually mild people experienced a fierce indignation crisis which was to lead eventually yet inevitably to one another.

One only of the four was to enjoy his revolt—possibly because Mr. Sondes had deliberately provoked the occasion of his wrath, before regaining with measured step the sanctuary of his rooms in Albany.

The other three remained martyrs. Mr. Ellis, managing clerk to the solicitors Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel, as a victim of circumstance; the Contessina Ludmilla Bathildis Vienne of her Italian grandmother; and Mrs. Betterton-Best of a laudable passion for perfection.

By May—and just before each climax had occurred—England was sunning itself in cloudless skies from morning to night. London had smartened up out of war-time recognition. Nineteen-nineteen itself had opened auspiciously with the romantic marriage of Princess Patricia of Connaught and Commander the Hon. Alexander Ramsay. Blonde Mrs. Betterton-Best, admirably placed as usual, saw with approval that Queen Alexandra, in violet velvet, had come out of mourning at last. And when King George and Queen Mary advanced up the aisle to Sir Edward Elgar's 'Imperial March', she felt it was almost like old times.

On the surface, paint and plaster and fresh window-boxes had already worked wonders in 1919, but Mr. Ellis, a

Scotsman who looked every day of his forty-eight years, noted methodically the newsboys' hoardings on his nightly way back to Baker Street. England as a home fit for heroes had a dangerous housing problem. He too, as one of a respectful crowd had witnessed that stirring March of the Overseas Forces through London, when the King had spoken for all: 'I wish you God-speed on your homeward journey, with a hope that the outcome of this world struggle may assure peace to your children and to your children's children.'

Mild Mr. Ellis, who was of a sceptical turn of mind, found himself wondering, but remained mum, for by June 1919, the Office was reacting violently to the nasty shock of the Germans efficiently sinking their own fleet in Scapa Flow—and later both Mr. Frobisher and Mr. Steel had given voice over the German Premier's protest against the Versailles Treaty. Didn't the Germans know they were beaten, in the War to end wars? The outlook didn't look promising to Mr. Ellis—even though Captain Alcock and Lieutenant Brown (good luck to them) had now flown the Atlantic for the first time.

But by 1919, Mrs. Betterton-Best, a chic thirty-eight who was often taken for thirty-five, was once more her sunny self. 'Hats will be large and floppy,' she read, amused, in her morning paper, 'with every kind of flower, from the big rose to the dandelion pouf and the little forget-me-not.' A graver note was struck by her *Evening News*: 'There is nothing to justify hooped dresses, and yet they exist already. Parisien clients will have nothing to do with crinolines. Who, then, is encouraging this horrible fashion?'

It certainly was not Mlle Lenglen, who had brought off a 100 to 1 chance at Wimbledon, in Spartan attire.

On Peace Day, July 1919, for the first time in her elegant life Mrs. Betterton-Best had luxuriated in popular press descriptions of processions, field sports, fireworks and illuminations. She could not have enough of peace. It seemed as if the nightmare tide of war had turned at last around the new Whitehall Cenotaph—raised in chilly warning.

But hot-foot on Remembrance had come New Year's Day 1920, celebrated with jazz drums and feverish syncopation till five in the morning. Had London gone crazy?

However, by February the soaring cost of living had sobered

most people. And later Madame Melba had moved the masses more becomingly by singing 'Home Sweet Home' to listeners one thousand miles away—through a wireless telephone instrument at the Marconi station, Chelmsford. It was certainly pleasanter to dwell on this marvel than on letters in the press from Ex-Officers who found they were now expected to support a wife and two children on two pounds five shillings a week. As if to frank those letters the coffin of the Unknown Warrior came home at the end of the year, with his battered tin hat resting on the flag, and was received by a weeping multitude, many of whom had kept an all-night vigil.

Mr. Hugh Sondes, recently retired from the Foreign Office, observed those tears dispassionately. He was a bachelor of a cool and critical nature—a fact concealed for many by his perfect manners and a charming smile. Nor did his interest quicken in the contemporary scene until 1921 opened with a prodigal announcement from the Egyptian Government that 20,000,000 eggs would shortly be shipped. Control was therefore at an end. A rapid fall in retail prices might be anticipated quite soon. Beside this positive contribution, the Sinn Fein arson outrages left Mr. Sondes stone cold.

Not so Mr. Ellis. Those fifty outbreaks had him worried. It was said that the Bank of England was taking elaborate precautions, and he could readily believe it.

Mrs. Betterton-Best, in her Regent's Park villa was disgusted with the latest turn of events, although she did not blame the Irish—to the astonishment of her friends. She blamed Lloyd George whom, it appeared, she had never trusted. She wished, she said, that the Sinn Fein would put a match to *him*. As Mrs. Betterton-Best was quite rich, her remarks were often treated with more respect than they perhaps merited. Charitably her listeners remembered that attractive widows who deliberately remained widows tended to become oracular.

But the elderly shook their heads, and by April licence had taken another form. Women were invited to smoke publicly rose-tinted, scented cigarettes. At the Tobacco Fair, in attitudes described as graceful, cunning, beautiful, female models were displayed before a row of solemn judges.

Meantime with gusto London school-boys were breaking

limbs in an attempt to emulate Douglas Fairbanks, while their sisters swooned for Valentino. Charlie Chaplin alone remained a blameless delight. The American invasion was complete. And every adult who could, now prepared to go dancing-mad—at the palais, on the pier or the night-club.

Periodically a head-line caught their attention: 'Millions of Children Starve in Europe', but they could scarcely credit it.

Since the Egyptian eggs in January, Mr. Sondes had continued unenlivened, for during Europe's shipwreck his only interest, like Robinson Crusoe's, lay in salvage items. Assets were his one concern. Ireland he had regretfully written off. The radical in Lloyd George was bilked by the lawyer—and his finessing now only delayed the inevitable: an embittered enemy on the door-step. Mr. Sondes calculated that by July the Welsh wizard would also be confronted by more than two millions of unemployed—which must precipitate the end of the Coalition, and a probable Tory majority next year. Further chaos. . . .

In March 1921, Mr. Sondes, as Robinson Crusoe, was to be rewarded by a glimpse of Man Friday's footprint. Dining alone one night at White's, a friend in passing handed him a chit, with a brief nod. Next day the Red Revolution tacitly ceased to be so described. A trade agreement was announced that morning between Britain and Russia. On this fact Mr. Sondes now dwelt as a lover might—persistently.

The trade agreement, which was discreetly given a modest press, actually caught Mrs. Betterton-Best's fleet glance. How very nice, she thought . . . From Mr. Betterton-Best she had earlier learnt the importance of international co-operation. Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf were once more setting off to market together. Life was coming back to normal.

By May 1921 this notion of normality was confirmed for her by the summer splendour of the London parks, the flowery profusion of the gardens. The heatwave was recalling that pre-war warmth of 1911, with its Coronation festivity. Now, as then, the whole island was basking. Striped awnings opened at daybreak. By noon a procession of water-carts had passed in brief blessing. Long after dark Pall Mall mansions and clubs left doors and windows wide, and through the breathless still-

ness of the night, tubs of hydrangea and hanging-baskets of fern and geranium exuded the pleasant oppression of a greenhouse. In Piccadilly restaurateurs trailed smilax across banquetting-tables to further an idea of coolness. In Soho, where space was confined, they piled their fruit in pyramids, and offered paper fans.

Mrs. Betterton-Best had no longer any doubt of post-war peace; and this despite a serious domestic crisis at her villa in Regent's Park. On any personal matter she always remained unruffled. Years ago—and for the best of reasons—she had set her private barometer at serene, and there it steadfastly remained, to the admiration of a few intimates and many acquaintances. Poise was, in fact, her principle, and a transparent yet flawless complexion gave further evidence of this health within. Envious contemporaries glimpsing her in the theatre, or at Ascot, maintained that she was enamelled, but no man believed them.

As for her domestic problem, she would solve that as she had solved all others—successfully. Nor would she go abroad this summer. She would spend it unfashionably at home. It was not the first time she had done so. London took on a curious charm the moment one's friends left it. It was then like roaming around in a foreign city—or another century. Freedom was the word she wanted! And long before that, her dilemma would be at an end. The past month had been difficult, but it was essential not to rush matters. The Villa, perfection itself, demanded perfection—and for nearly twenty years had secured this. Through the war period too. So why not twenty more? Why not indeed! She was always lucky—yes, really the luckiest thing!

Unexpectedly Mrs. Betterton-Best shivered. 'This happy boast, second-nature from childhood, had last been indulged just before her major calamity—the death of Mr. Betterton-Best.

Hastily she decided that the heatwave must be building up for thunder . . . although the daily forecast was invariably an understatement at present.

'Fair or fine', she verified, 'rather high temperature'.

That, of course, proved it. . . .

At this same hour, the Continental weather report for May was passing under review in Venice.

With a lack-lustre eye, the Contessina Ludmilla noted it. There had been floods in Spain; a frightful deluge in Thuringia with loss of seventeen lives; a waterspout in Portugal, destroying four parishes. And a shower of frogs at Gibraltar, during a thunderstorm. There were also tornadoes in America; a landslide in Java; and such a flood in the Tigris valley that the railway had been swept away. But nothing affected the Contessina as much as the frogs. They seemed to her to be of Biblical significance—and, although the war was over, to have a whiff of Armageddon. She was more depressed than usual for not only was she in poor health, but she was approaching her thirtieth birthday and this—contrary to popular belief—is the age of crisis for any spinster as unassuming as herself. One for whom hope has done literally nothing, has indeed proved a snare and a delusion.

In the baroque magnificence of her grandmother's palazzo, she had lived on memories since her arrival there as an orphan, at the age of fourteen. On memories of Paris and her father, an impecunious French professor, and an equally adoring mother, whom even now she could scarcely credit was the runaway daughter of that tartar Augusta, Duchess of Zollfeld and Veit. On recollections of that sun-splashed, cloud-washed top-floor *appartement* on the Left Bank, where laughter, love and learning had been the order of the day, punctuated by simple meals, prepared by the daughter of the Duchess who had speedily discovered that she was a born cook. Of this Arcadian period Ludmilla was now the sole and melancholy survivor.

Suddenly her eye brightened. She was searching the weather report for the British Isles, almost the only place at present to enjoy sunshine and calm. Ludmilla did not know England, but she was dwelling eagerly now on London, and a woman she had never met. From a stolen glimpse at a photograph and hearsay, her beauty and her courage had become a legend for this timid creature.

Her heroine must be almost forty now, but she would not age as quickly as a dark woman—she would just become frosty-fair! 'I wonder if she is still there,' she mused, 'in that Regency

villa with the sphinx on its parapet? How strange to think I know her secret, and yet she does not even know that I exist. What courage she had!' That was always the note on which she ended with her paragon.

There with a sigh the matter might have ended, a sigh with which she sank into her usual apathy, but her gaze in travelling across the newspaper was arrested by the date. The daily newspaper always reached Ludmilla a day late, for the Duchess, a miser, permitted one newspaper only, which she retained until next day's arrival.

Suddenly, in a wave of wholly unaccountable fury Ludmilla noticed that this paper with its frogs was *two* days old. Armageddon had been side-stepped, the Day of Judgement itself was an anti-climax. In this accursed house nothing but her physical and mental malaise had any reality.

Trembling she rose. 'I'll do it,' she decided, 'if it's the last thing I do. Anyway, I might as well be dead. What have I to lose? It will mean a dreadful lie, and a lie like that is mortal sin. But I've stood too much, and for too long.'

And because she was, as her grandmother repeatedly declared, an undisciplined Protestant, the Contessina added in desperation, but with more spirit than she would have dared to show any human being: 'God will just have to forgive me.'

Hers was the first of the four far-reaching indignation crises to flame forth, for although the mildest of these martyrs, she was also the youngest and the most miserable.

2. Mr. Ellis's Lull

Looking back later, Mr. Ellis perceived that his calamity had affected him twenty-four hours before it happened—as a storm brewing.

An habitually even-tempered man, he awoke disgruntled. This in itself upset him, for the May day was bland as June, the sky a cloudless blue, and he was always ready for his breakfast, heatwave or not. His mood struck him as unreasonable, yet each time he glanced out of his window, or around his bedroom, the less he liked his situation. And this was sheer ingratitude for Cholmondeley Chambers, residential club for gentlemen, had housed him in drab but genuine comfort for over a decade. It had done more. It had given him final security from the widowed or spinster landlady who invariably realized that a quiet, nicely mannered lodger from a solicitor's office, who could also, in the evenings, turn his hand to anything from a defective washer to a burst pipe, was a man to have permanently on the premises. In Clapham, Croydon, Kentish Town and Shepherds Bush, for twenty years Mr. Ellis had been pursued. The rooms had usually been clean and comfortable, their hostess selected for her respectable, indeed reserved, appearance. Each time Mr. Ellis would congratulate himself afresh that he had achieved sanctuary. It made no difference. The suggestion, after a few weeks, that he should no longer use the slot-machine on the gas-meter was usually the first danger signal. The offer to wash his shirts rather than

have these ruined by the laundry proved the inescapable evidence of infatuation.

Widows, he regretted to note, were invariably more reckless than spinsters in showing their hand, but spinsters he later discovered developed a diabolical persistence that pursued by post. Unlike their bereaved sisters they did not know when they were beaten. So tenacious had one spinster been that Mr. Ellis, finally terrified, had consulted the senior partner of Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel. Mr. Franklyn not only dressed the lady down on the firm's official paper, but he had saved Mr. Ellis's sanity by suggesting Cholmondeley Chambers, off Baker Street, where for ten years Mr. Ellis had remained well satisfied—until today.

Cholmondeley Chambers, a gaunt Victorian caravanserai with red brick walls and yellow keystone facings, now puce-coloured with half a century's grime, was known irreverently to the local tradespeople as The Chums. Its interior, Moorish-Gothic in conception, was also dark, and shared a disadvantage with certain railway hotels. It was clean, but it did not look it.

Today, as Mr. Ellis shaved, he noticed that noises from the mews at the back were reduced by the high garden wall to a funereal rumble which suggested the hollow nature of all material things. This had not occurred to him before. In winter the lank trees of the garden dripped silently, in summer they drooped dustily. At their May-time best today, they appeared to be bearing up—and no more. The garden's narrow path led straight to its only architectural feature—a row of dustbins, uniform in size and each with a lid that fitted decently. There are dustbins and dustbins, and Mr. Ellis had known some unworthy specimens elsewhere. Those of Cholmondeley Chambers were not depraved, but as much a credit to that establishment as such totally exposed objects can be. The fact that they were the cynosure of every back window in the five-storey building may have had something to do with their military precision. Twice a week the garden door beneath its savage lintel of broken bottle-glass was left unbarred at night. And twice a week, with the regularity of cock-crow, every sleeper at The Chums was awakened by a galvanized call to arms as the dustmen clashed the lids like cymbals against the stone flags. And twice a week, throughout a lifetime, everyone

grumbled at Cholmondeley Chambers, but as this was England, did nothing to alter the situation.

By that hour of assembly, breakfast was being served, and breakfast at Cholmondeley Chambers was more than adequate. It was, in fact, the best meal of the day. Both tea and coffee were strong, the rolls hot, the bacon properly grilled. The residents, moreover, had bathed in water that was piping. Confidence increased for each newcomer with the realization that the drab aura of the place was merely metaphysical. With time a grudging affection sometimes grew. To be warm and comfortable there in winter, or cool and easy in summer, and fairly well fed at all times may not be everything, but at a reasonable price, and in an imperfect world, it is a good deal.

Or so Mr. Ellis had thought until today, when the orderly seclusion of the Chambers suddenly staled on him. Instead of soothing, its uniform dullness seeped—as if in his flight from the female dangers of the suburbs he had landed himself in a well-run mortuary.

This ingratitude was remarkable, for not only had Mr. Ellis several friends and one crony there, but Mr. Muspratt, manager of the Chambers, actually approved of him—a distinction bestowed on no one else. It had taken Mr. Ellis years to achieve this lustre, but there were older residents who daily went down the back stairs rather than face Mr. Muspratt at the front.

Mr. Muspratt was a peevish whippersnapper of a man, who wore the same morning coat and striped trousers summer and winter, and often looked as if he had slept in these, for he had far too much to do. That Mr. Ellis should have found favour in his eyes was simply explained, although not by all so readily understood. As in the suburbs, repeatedly and effectively Mr. Ellis had coped with those emergencies that take a fiendish delight in declaring themselves during weekends or Bank holidays when plumbers and electricians are inaccessible. And there had actually been an autumnal occasion when Mr. Ellis had ventured on to the roof itself, in a gale, a feat which had (at half-time) horrified Mr. Muspratt who was suddenly uncertain how his company stood as to insurance liability. But Mr. Ellis had replaced slates with such complete sangfroid that the flood had been excluded, until Monday mercifully succeeded Sun-

day. Moreover, Mr. Ellis in descending through a skylight, had borne a chimney cowl which he described as heading for the street. Mr. Muspratt was further impressed by the fact that Mr. Ellis who was now as black as a sweep, had made no bones about it. Inconspicuous his guest might be, but on any occasion like the present he was wholly adequate.

Today on his way to breakfast, Mr. Ellis saw Mr. Muspratt at the Reception desk, as was usual at that hour, dealing out the morning mail with the phlegm of a poker player.

'Nice day,' Mr. Ellis remarked, doing his best to believe it. Those who greeted Mr. Muspratt before eight a.m. were invariably ignored, but as Mr. Ellis was still a potential answer to any plumbing prayer, Mr. Muspratt favoured him with a grunt. Mr. Ellis was accustomed to this grunt, but today he reacted differently to it.

Surly dog, was his inward comment, and he proceeded to breakfast increasingly disturbed by his own antagonism.

The dining-room at Cholmondeley Chambers was both dark and lofty, for in alternating the Moorish influence of the tiled hall, its Gothic windows let in little light. It resembled a gloomy chapel which now accommodated, somewhat incongruously, forty card tables set for breakfast. The flimsy appearance of the tables was due entirely to the aspiring height of pillars and ceiling, for actually each table was as solid and comfortable as its leather chair.

Mr. Ellis's breakfast did nothing to cheer him. He merely felt thankful that Horace Simms had not come down yet—although Mr. Simms was his best friend at Cholmondeley! After ten years they had recently got on to first name terms. It is true that this was the full extent of their intimacy, except for the fact that Mr. Ellis knew as much about Horace's rheumatism as the patient, and that Mr. Simms was always the first to know that Mr. Ellis was again going to Cromer for his summer holiday. But although formal, it was a genuine relationship, and James knew a great deal more about the elderly Horace than Mr. Simms had ever told him. Mr. Simms had been polite about his relatives to the point of piety, but Mr. Ellis had not been deceived. He could sense those three strong-minded females in the background, vague as the witches of childhood but as real. Horace's mother, his sister and his Aunt

Patty had ruled the roost until death released him—and too late, for Mr. Simms was the small rotund smiling sort that women quite callously chevy around—a born victim. The family had been tea-merchants for generations, yet Horace had been pensioned off as soon as the partners could. That in Mr. Ellis's view had been Horace's final catastrophe, for a man's work was his life. Mr. Simms had made no comment when relating the facts. But an axe in descent does not need description. Mr. Ellis could hear it whistle over Horace's head, and that was enough. In refinement Horace P. Simms was a cut above many at the Chambers, and Mr. Ellis always deplored the fact that he was jocularly known in the dining-room as Sauce.

Yet he knew well enough that Mr. Simms was possibly the only resident who thoroughly enjoyed The Chums. Nobody wanted to marry Mr. Simms, but after a restless period in semi-genteel boarding-houses where he had been compelled to make way, or give up every chair to any woman present, Cholmondeley Chambers, which likewise ignored him, left him with his place at the fireside, or the writing-table, and in undisputed possession of his own newspaper. Above all, it bestowed on him that small, enviable table in the dining-room, between the radiator and the buffet-screen—a table so secure from draughts that the odour of breakfast kipper still haunted it, when pears *Mary Garden* graced it at night. And at the next table was his friend James Ellis. Mr. Simms was in heaven, and he knew it. The waitresses had at last relented towards him. They regarded him with the kindly contempt which they would have shown a stray cat that manages to behave well, and sometimes brought him extra tit-bits: 'Mr. Muspratt is not in tonight—having a tray sent up, so you've got his savoury as well.' And Mr. Simms would see two small objects that resembled pink dominoes on his plate, introduced by the menu every Wednesday as *Croute Ivanhoe*, and to which he was in his own words, very partial—much obliged!

Mr. Ellis was sincerely attached to Mr. Simms—no one else made him feel such a social success, but he knew he could not stand the milk of human kindness this morning.

Without his second cup of tea, he managed to escape, and in the open air felt better. Earlier than usual he climbed to the

top of a city-bound bus, and saw that the blue day was already dim with heat at the distant end of each street. Delicately he sniffed, and knew that there would be thunder before night.

Passing down Haymarket this crofter's son could still read the weather. Year by year through those city streets, and in due season, he would sense the local crops of vanished fields around him. April had been an unusually good month for farmers, and by its close corn-sowing was almost finished. Potato planting was also forward this year. On his week-end walks into the country he saw that much progress had been made with root-sowing, but rain was badly needed, even then, for a satisfactory hay crop. Yet somehow he had been confident of a fine harvest this year. And it would be needed, for two bad harvests lay behind the country. By May he knew that livestock had done well, although in Kent the apple harvest was already damaged by frosts. Still, the lambs were frisking around on his Sunday jaunts, and seemed healthier than usual.

Today this promising outlook failed to cheer him. He got out at Charing Cross, as was his custom, walked down Villiers Street, and along Embankment Gardens, empty at this hour, towards the office.

Mr. Ellis's work was the consuming interest of his life. Daily he had to exercise control, lest he arrived too soon. Earlier on, this had not mattered, although it made him unpopular with his subordinates, but for the past five years his status had been that of partner in all but deed. In fact, there were several firms in the City who maintained between themselves, that James Blair Ellis was the ablest lawyer in F.F. and S. and although Mr. Ellis ignored it, he was not unaware of this view. It was to the credit of Messrs. Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel that they had always recognized an element of truth in this tribute. Their treatment of Mr. Ellis, once he had proved his mettle, had been just, if scarcely generous, and their personal relationship consistently agreeable. Mr. Ellis, who had entered the firm at the age of sixteen, had long since acquired a comprehensive grasp of the three partners' problems as well as his own side of the business. He could, and did deputize for both Mr. Frobisher and Mr. Steel on occasion—thus any failure of those two main lines was successfully met

by the night Scotsman from beyond Beattock toiling doggedly through the small hours. Mr. Ellis's reward was this growing grasp of all for which F.F. and S. stood. His dedication was a creative act that absorbed him, body and soul. With tireless application and considerable native ability he had built him a stronghold in this foreign keep. He was indispensable, and he knew it—better than anyone else, perhaps. But that did not put him up or down. His one aim and object was F. F. and S. as a flourishing practice. At this, the age of fifty, his identification with the firm was complete.

His entry into the London office had been unusual. It might almost be said that he had been kidnapped—although the complaint would never have been made by Mr. Ellis.

An orphan from the age of six, he had been brought up by his grandmother at Croft Knock, seven miles from Drumgelder to the east, and one mile from the clachan of Barras to the west. This clachan, larger than many, boasted a Church, a smithy, a school, a general store and a shabby secretive inn known locally as Rantin' Rab. Through the pass at Barras, the river Lissa stormed between the trees and rocks that cover the dense base of Knockfarrel Heights. Then out into the open the Lissa flowed calmly through a desolate strath. High above the river, on a ridge of hills as bold and bare as those opposite stood Croft Knock, a two-storied granite cottage. This bleak building on its grassy bluff was the only habitation visible for miles to the distant express train which daily passed along the hills across the river. Those travellers who spied the Croft marvelled at its isolation. Seen from the train in springtime, miles away, with the river brimming its treeless banks, the grey house suggested a gravestone sunk in the rain-fresh earth; but in summer, bathed in light and without a tremor stirring the steadfast blue reflection in the river, it looked more promising—a forsaken milestone perhaps.

There he had dwelt with a satisfaction that only lacked completeness, as he had then no notion of how happy he was. His grandmother, a small silent, active woman, much respected in the district, was as reserved indoors as out. Once only had she lost her temper with him. Back he had come for the second time with a bruised face and a bleeding nose that first week at school.

'James Blair Ellis,' she had demanded, 'are ye not ashamed to let them make mince-meat of ye?'

The shock of her angry contempt had all but destroyed him, and next time when they set upon him, on the road, he had lashed out in such fury that neither he nor they had recognized the new scholar.

Thereafter, his progress in learning had been a swift and sure development that set him ahead of his fellows. So much so, that the Laird of Glen Lissa, while entertaining his good friend Mr. Franklyn from London at dinner, after a day on the Lurg Moor, mentioned his name, 'The lad is sixteen now, and the Drungeldy dominic tells me he should go on to the University. But there is the usual lack of funds. I suppose I ought to help. There's no doubt about his intelligence, and he's a sober, studious boy—though I doubt if he'd have the requisite punch to succeed in business.'

Mr. Franklyn who needed a young clerk at his office—one, moreover, who would not hive off after training—decided privately that F.F. and S. could supply any missing punch. He saw young Ellis and was favourably impressed, although he was a slight youth with rather a colourless face, barely saved from insignificance by a broad brow, a long upper lip and steady eyes. He looked older than his years, and somewhat to his own surprise Mr. Franklyn found himself offering a larger wage than he had intended. But the lad would do—probably do very well. Conscientious—not too enterprising. Mr. Franklyn, who was perceptive, ceased to regret that larger wage—it had certainly ensured no more talk of the University.

Instead James Blair Ellis emigrated to London, where at first his nostalgia for the hills of Barras amounted to an illness, and was hidden like a shame.

For three years he returned to Croft Knock for his two weeks annual holiday, but after his grandmother's death he did not go back to Barras. He had an absurd fear that with strangers in the Croft, and possibly other changes around it, the place would be altered, spoiled beyond reclaim. He did not think of Barras more than he could help. He took his yearly holiday in England, and later in his thirties ventured to France.

Once, at the age of forty he was obliged to return to the

north of Scotland on business for the firm—to a well-known estate some hours' journey beyond his old home. In the early spring morning, as the train rode high along the rampart, above the strath, he looked across to the remembered home, standing remote on the bold, bare hill opposite. With the deepest emotion he had felt in years he stared out—now that he could no longer escape the confrontation. To his stupefaction and joy, the scene was in every detail as it had been before—the distant house angular, exact, familiar as the drawing on a child's slate that time had not yet obliterated. He rose to his feet in the empty carriage and let down the window. The still air of April met him with the cold shock of melting snow, and then with a warmer current—the odour of the bog, pungent with moss so ancient that it had borrowed Andromeda's name from the stars. With sedge, reeds and rushes he had regained his roots, if not their source; and as the train swept him away, he knew himself restored.

Thereafter his London life bettered in many ways. With satisfaction he moved into Cholmondeley Chambers. Yet sometimes at night he dreamt he was running down the hill behind Croft Knock, as he had so often done in childhood—in a skirling autumn twilight to the warmth and comfort of the house. From this dream he always awoke refreshed. It never varied in delight except that now and then in the darkness someone who was quicker off the mark than he, seized his hand and ran fleetly down the hill with him. He couldn't see his friend, but that didn't matter—it was the home ahead that did. . . .

Walking along the Embankment Gardens now, Mr. Ellis realized that by this very different river the early morning freshness was already wearing off. The day would be a scorcher. He glanced at his watch. He was still too early, having omitted half his breakfast, but he did not wish to upset the office staff. They were a touchy lot since the war. With a sigh he sat down on one of the park seats.

Mr. Ellis had been the butt of more office boys than he cared to remember, and remained something of a conundrum to his colleagues, for he was not the vigorous lowland Scot that the Londoner could recognize as a standing joke or the age-old enemy. His self-effacing manner might suggest the English-

man at his conventional best, but his unshaken highland courtesy, in the teeth of all opposition, came to be regarded as a crafty form of flattery—as in the end, Ellis was certain to prevail. Always with the partners—another subtle pointer! Not only was there his efficiency, but his quiet, emollient attitude had an astonishing effect on each excitable client—it being a lamentable fact in legal practice that if clients are not overwrought on entering into consultation, they certainly are by the time weeks have lengthened into months that threaten to become years. The most exasperated client, however, could not fail to realize when Mr. Ellis had explained the situation that his temperate tone issued from genuine conviction. Despite its inordinate delays, Mr. Ellis appeared to believe in the Law as a vehicle that would yet move—and conclusively. As temperatures mounted with expenses, Mr. Ellis's grave nod of the head conveyed a dignified sympathy, while the steady gaze of his pale eyes suggested a probity that was more reassuring still.

Then too his patience exceeded that of either partner, for in middle-age Mr. Frobisher had discovered in himself a talent for water-colour painting, and Mr. Steel was now more devoted to the firm's subsidiary interest—a paper-mill in Manchester. Flighty enterprises, in Mr. Ellis's view, although the paper-mill's increasing prosperity continued to confound him.

In short Mr. Ellis's work was his hobby, which simplified life both for him and his clients.

Each year now, at the staff dinner, it was made abundantly clear to all how highly the three partners thought of our Mr. Ellis. Mr. Franklyn, approaching his eightieth birthday, his classical features enhanced by an immaculate white stock, was chiefly of decorative value to the firm these days, but his Christmas toast to Mr. Ellis at the Frascati dinner, in *Asti Spumante*, almost drew tears from that gentleman's tormentors. Physically, Mr. Ellis was incapable of blushing—when moved he simply grew paler, and as he rose to make the yearly response he was, as Mr. Steel sympathetically noted, white to the gills. But his short, crisp speech was delivered without a tremor, to the relief of Mr. Frobisher, whose wife had earlier warned him: 'One year that man will faint or fall down dead.'

Yet Mr. Ellis himself always felt that this ordeal was a small enough price to pay for the perennial satisfaction which his work at F. F. and S., afforded him. In thirty-five years once only had his health shown signs of strain. About five years ago he had unaccountably lost appetite and interest for some weeks. There had been an onset of depression like today's—

But this, as he reminded himself, had been successfully put to flight by a new interest. Music had proved to be the romance of Mr. Ellis's life, and, like all belated love-affairs, a soul-stirring experience.

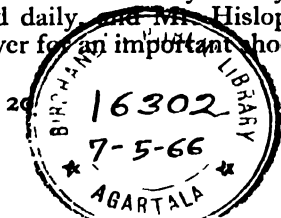
This recollection was prompted by the memorial to Sir Arthur Sullivan opposite his Embankment seat. He did not like this work of art which consisted of a bust of Sir Arthur on a pedestal, round which a female figure clung. Obviously this woman represented music or drama, but in the abandon of her grief she clung too close. Yet Sir Arthur appeared to be totally oblivious of her. She embarrassed Mr. Ellis, and he well understood Sir Arthur's averted gaze. Mr. Ellis knew he was no judge of statuary but he could not understand how any artist could have brought those two unlikely images together. He had complained about this memorial to Mr. Hislop, his mentor in matters musical, and Mr. Hislop had agreed that the two figures did not look too happy together.

'But mark my words,' Mr. Hislop had added, apostrophizing the statue with his umbrella, 'in another fifty years this will have achieved antiquarian value.'

'Mphm,' he had replied, a form of assent that the office had long ago learnt meant the profoundest disagreement on the part of Mr. Ellis.

Frowning at the pedestal now, he wondered why he had been unlucky enough to sit down opposite it. He felt his irritation mounting again, although nothing would have induced him to change his seat till it was time to go.

Deliberately he turned his thought to Mr. Hislop, and the surprising benefits he had derived from that friendship. The last thing he had expected at the start of their acquaintance was conversion to the passion of Mr. Hislop's existence. He had first met this fellow-Scot at the Chancery Pantry, a small café where Mr. Ellis lunched daily, and Mr. Hislop twice a week. Mr. Hislop was the buyer for an important shoe shop in



the City, a man of his own age, but twice his size and weighty of word as well. When Mr. Hislop got on to his musical hobby-horse Mr. Ellis was left behind. Often he had no idea what Mr. Hislop was talking about, but he perceived that Mr. Hislop did, and he listened with such respect that Mr. Hislop shortly found him more congenial than other colleagues. He happened to be cursed, he admitted, with a wife who detested music. 'Rabid on the subject—it might be the Other Woman.'

Mr. Ellis, at that stage, had no strong feelings either way. He enjoyed a good brass band, and a short session in the park, each summer. As the saying goes—ever implicit with warning—he knew what he liked. When younger, the Salvation Army band had awakened heroic impulses in him which were born, and died, even as the music bore its interpreters down the street. On the few occasions each year that Mr. Ellis found himself in the Presbyterian Church of England, he enjoyed the voluntaries out of all proportion—he guiltily felt—to the rest of the Service. But this more secular satisfaction was always suitably punished by the hymn tunes from the same organ.

These occasions were the extent of Mr. Ellis's musical experience when he first listened politely to Mr. Hislop's fervent exposition on the subject.

Once in a burst of confidence he had advised Mr. Ellis never to marry. 'You mayn't have a major interest in your life like mine, something that's looked on like a sin, but all the same any man's better sing'e. What's a home, when all's said and done? It's bed and breakfast and your supper under the same roof, and one *you've* paid for, don't forget. Lodgings,' he added sombrely, 'can always be changed, but a female is the end of freedom.' Mrs. Hislop, it then transpired, couldn't bear his oboe. He was obliged to practise in his garden shed, and then the neighbours complained. It was very hard. Once only had Mr. Ellis heard this oboe—after-hours at the shoe shop. It completely mystified him. The sounds that Mr. Hislop made on this instrument were like nothing on earth. The music seemed to be Mr. Hislop's breath on two notes, one plaintive, the other piercing. The inexperienced Mr. Ellis felt nothing but his hair rise, and a shame-faced sympathy for Mrs. Hislop. But firmly he had declared when Mr. Hislop

finished, and his eyes ceased to protrude: 'Remarkable—very.' And it was with considerable misgiving that he next heard him announce that the time had come for Mr. Ellis to be produced at Swiss Cottage, as Mrs. Hislop was now suspicious of him too. She had sent a message today that Saturday supper, six sharp, this week, would suit nicely.

To Swiss Cottage he had reluctantly gone, as ordered.

Melrose, that August evening, turned out to be a small brick house, built perhaps ten years before the war, in a minute square garden as gaily sown with asters and zinnias as a wool-stitched sampler. Their scent of honey greeted Mr. Ellis at the gate, which he unhooked as cautiously as a bird-cage. The paved path looked as if it had been scrubbed by hand, and the windows of this dolls'-house sparkled with cleanliness and the sunset. On the door was a diamond of stained-glass, with a star glistening from a neat blue sky richly set in ruby lights.

A sprite of a woman opened this door. She had reddish curls, baby-blue eyes and a dimple in her chin. At first he thought the creature was a child, and then he saw the square jaw and the alert gaze of the border challenging him. She too was every day of her forty-five years, and in full command of the situation.

'Come in, Mr. Ellis,' she said, 'you're very welcome, I'm sure.'

The house seemed smaller still inside, as there were flowering plants on every table and each window sill. The massive Mr. Hislop had become a giant wedged in Thumbelina's bower, without hope of extrication. But his greeting was cordiality itself. Somewhat to Mr. Ellis's surprise, he held his oboe in one hand.

Within seconds, skirmishing began between his hosts.

'You've five minutes,' she warned her husband, 'while I'm dishing-up. I'll keep the taps running to drown you.'

'Suits me,' Mr. Hislop assured her genially.

'You an addict too?' Mrs. Hislop demanded.

'Well, scarcely,' Mr. Ellis hastily demurred.

'He's coming on, coming on nicely,' purposefully Mr. Hislop was mouthing his instrument.

'Look at that man,' scornfully Mrs. Hislop indicated Mr. Hislop whose size had once been his fatal attraction for her,

but who now looked far too big for the arm-chair she had bought to fit their room, 'as much use to me in the house as an elephant—just sits there and trumpets!'

Within five minutes as stipulated, Mrs. Hislop had deftly set before them in the next room a mixed grill that Escoffier would not have disdained. There was also an excellent burgundy, at the right temperature. Mr. Ellis was impressed. Earlier he had hurriedly averted his gaze from Mrs. Hislop's furniture, for he had known many and varied interiors in the course of his career as agent or executor, and he could now assess the humble or august for probate with uncanny aptitude. At a glance, regretfully he had been obliged to write-off Mrs. Hislop's as *nouveau-art*. But her table linen was finer than Mrs. Frobisher's, and the silver was genuine. Unhappily, wordy Mr. Hislop proved oblivious of his exceptional mixed grill, but in the first lull Mr. Ellis paid tribute.

Mrs. Hislop sniffed again. 'I've had trouble in the scullery,' she said, 'and had to keep dancing in and out. It would happen on a Saturday. The cold tap's flooding.'

'Well now,' Mr. Ellis said, with his usual idiocy, 'perhaps I can put that right.'

'Without making more mess?' anxiously she watched him.

'You leave that to me,' he advised, and although it took the best part of half an hour, he was as good as his word.

Mrs. Hislop could not get over it, and later as she set a stirrup-cup of tea before him, observed: 'I'd forgotten folk like you existed. My father was civil engineer. I've never known comfort since I left him at Hawick. He could turn his hand to any mortal thing. A blocked drain, and before you could say knife he'd have the inspection cover in the garden open, and no one any wiser. What I've suffered since I married! All *he* can do is raise the roof with that pipe.'

It was shortly after his first visit to Melrose that Mr. Ellis had the unique experience of his life. Heralded by just such a dejection as he was suffering today. Mr. Steel, the youngest partner, was the only one to notice that he was not as well as he should be. Mr. Steel was five years older than Mr. Ellis, but he looked much younger. There had always been an unspoken sympathy between them, and now he suggested a week's holiday. Margate perhaps. When Mr. Ellis demurred, he

warned him: 'You ought to have a hobby, you know. And I don't mean mousing about Somerset House on ancient records. I know you do a certain amount of walking, but that can lead to introspection. You need something to take you out of yourself. Get the theatre habit—or something like that.'

It was the longest personal conversation he had ever had with Mr. Steel. And he was still more surprised when two days later Mr. Steel presented him with two concert tickets for a big event at the Albert Hall.

Mr. Ellis at once thought of Mr. Hislop, although he felt there was an element of presumption in accompanying his friend to this sanctuary, where Mr. Hislop moved with such authority. But Mr. Hislop was robustly gracious. 'It's never too late to take the plunge,' he assured him. 'This programme is in today's paper. A veritable bath of beauty.'

The fact that Mr. Ellis found himself shrinking anew on the brink of this immersion, made the revelation when it came more remarkable still.

As he and Mr. Hislop took their places in two of the best seats a few minutes before the concert began, Mr. Ellis was privately alarmed by the size of the orchestra. It struck him as enormous. Quite unlike anything he had seen in the park. The din might prove awful indoors, and Mr. Ellis disliked noise. From a quick glance there seemed to be twelve or six duplicates of each instrument, and the musicians were arranged in eight tiers. They clearly meant business. When Mr. Hislop offered him the programme he shook his head—sweat was already rising on his brow. But the *Turandot* Overture and *March* by Weber passed off better than he could have hoped. No real din. It didn't go on as long as he expected either, and certainly was not monotonous. He too joined in the applause that followed. He ceased to sweat, and looked around him, more at ease. Mr. Hislop was full of praise for the conductor. 'Born interpreter, born interpreter, yes, yes—simplicity and flow in every movement! *Mother Goose* suite next—by Ravel.'

Mother Goose failed to hold Mr. Ellis's attention, but he passed the time watching the conductor. He found his movements pleasantly mesmeric. The evening was wearing on quite well.

And then it happened—with the next item on the pro-

gramme. Mr. Ellis did not even know its name—something or other by someone called Borodin. But from the first chord Mr. Ellis was alive to all that followed, and in the most extraordinary way. Unknown years of his own life were unfolded for him. Recognition was instantaneous. He could see a vast, treeless plain with hordes of Tartars strung across it—and knew that he and countless others were racing across the steppe to repel this threat. Back and forward for generations this guerrilla warfare had gone on. Lifetime followed lifetime—with, on the domestic front, different wives, sons, daughters. Friends proved false or true; he had the devil's luck; he met a martyr's fate; in turn riches, poverty, and the happy mean discovered him to himself. Yet always he emerged with the music. He did not know if he were finally victorious in this foray with fate on that vast steppe. But in the slow movement that followed he knew that it had been a tremendous experience—that this was the recompense. And in the final movement he was enraptured to realize that he had enough vitality to begin all over again—one of the crowd in an ordinary marketplace he could not name. He was restored by every memory—one with the elements at last, with brute creation too, humanity itself, the earth, the stars . . . But at that instant of union, the final chord struck—a summons which was to leave him ever more at attention. . . .

After the concert, seated in a Knightsbridge café, he told Mr. Hislop of his amazing experience.

Mr. Hislop listened attentively, and then shook his head. 'Strictly speaking, that's no way to listen to music. It shouldn't be a story any more than an oil painting should be—though I won't deny it's promising that you picked up the oriental influence, for Borodin was a Russian. It's clear that something has got through to you—'

'Something?' his companion stared at him, he who had passed through centuries of time, and tasted immortality in his flight! It was abundantly clear to Mr. Ellis that his bath of beauty had been a great deal more explicit than Mr. Hislop's.

Mr. Hislop nodded encouragingly, 'Yes, indeed—it's certainly a beginning.'

'Mphm,' Mr. Ellis intoned.

Next day he assured Mr. Steel, somewhat to that gentleman's surprise: 'I never enjoyed a night so much. It was better than a month at Margate.'

Thereafter, at appropriate intervals Mr. Steel had peppered him with concert tickets in pairs. On one occasion Mr. Ellis had secured a third for Mrs. Hislop, but she had taken cramp before the interval, and asked to be excused another time. The only thing that had impressed her had been the packed hall. 'Who'd have thought it,' she kept exclaiming, 'well, it takes all sorts to make a world.'

But for Mr. Ellis and her husband the past few years had been, in Mr. Hislop's words, 'a period of perpetual enrichment.' They became well known by sight to regular concert-goers, who sometimes facetiously referred to them as the long and the short of it. A few of the less enlightened took them for music-critics, and there was some speculation in the interval as to which paper they belonged.

By this time Mr. Ellis had come to know why he liked what he liked, and to be critical of what he did not! He would actually venture upon argument with Mr. Hislop, who welcomed these signs of primitive development, and lost no opportunity in setting him to rights. They were both a great deal happier than they realized, although, privately, neither had yet lost sight of the remarkable fact that they were sitting in the best seats free. It added a final touch of enchantment to the occasion.

In his fortieth year music had restored to Mr. Ellis that sense of wonder in life which, as a child and a young man, had so strongly imbued him. At first an escape, later it proved for him an active participation in a very different world from that in which he was now ageing. Existence had justified itself out of office hours. After his introduction to music, he faced his fellow-men with more conviction on social occasions. His manner hardened slightly, and the current office boy took fewer liberties.

Mr. Ellis seated in the Embankment Gardens reminded himself now that he had two tickets for a notable programme at the Queen's Hall next week. No excuse for today's pessimism. Now, had he felt this depression ten days ago when Mr. Steel first announced his premature retirement from the firm,

it would have been understandable—for that had been a shock. Mr. Steel was only five years older than he was, and the reason he had given Mr. Ellis was almost absurd. People did not retire when they married.

'Married?' Mr. Ellis had repeated, chilled by the tidings. Time and again Mr. Steel, a confirmed bachelor, had punned in his own hearing, after some unusually troublesome divorce case: 'Another warning writ large!' And there he was now, jovially delighted with this serious step he meant to take. Mr. Ellis had trembled for him, but the realization that this would mean more work for Mr. Frobisher and himself had pulled him together. Another clerk would certainly be needed—Mr. Ellis had been startled and regretful, but by no means dejected.

Until today. Was it possible that he was feeling Mr. Steel's departure next week as a personal bereavement? He was not certain that this was the explanation. He remained unsure. . . .

Glancing at his watch, he rose impatiently from the seat. For a second he had a ridiculous impression that Sir Arthur Sullivan was avoiding his eye also—

It was time to go, even if it meant—as it did —getting to the office on the dot of nine.

3. Mr. Ellis's Storm, morning

As he turned into Stone Buildings he was surprised to see Mr. Steel ahead, hurrying up the steps and—vanishing through the door before him, late again, Henry the office boy!

'Lax, lax,' Mr. Ellis muttered, but the sight of Messrs. Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel's austere façade was as balm to his soul, the climb up the narrow, dark stairway past Enquiries' opaque window, the path of peace. This last led first through the waiting-room with its black leather couch and chairs, the mahogany centre table on which lay the *Financial Times*, last month's *Punch*, today's *Times* beneath a moribund potted palm. By the window was the small writing-table with pens, blotting paper and a copy of the New Testament. Mr. Frobisher was their Commissioner for Oaths. The oak bookcase opposite was furnished with Halsbury's *Laws of England*; the *Encyclopaedia of Laws and Precedents*. Mr. Ellis had aged imperceptibly with those volumes on *Patent Law and Practice*; Palmer's *Company Precedents* and Williams on *Bankruptcy*. It was all as it had ever been—immensely reassuring.

Two of the clerks—one of them Mr. Frobisher's secretary—were running up and down the stairs, and had to pause to let Mr. Ellis pass, for the stairway, like the small, eighteenth-century rooms, might have belonged to some forgotten village domicile. But already its peculiar odour welcomed him—that of fresh paper, old leather, ink, beeswax and the self-contained

damp of a very old building . . . with, as he passed Mr. Franklyn's door, the ghost of a good cigar.

By the time Mr. Ellis reached his own room on the third floor, Henry was assiduously wiping his ink-well. The boy's face had certainly been washed, and his hair reeked of cheap pomade, but his neck was very dirty.

'You're late,' Mr. Ellis informed him coldly.

'Yessir, very sorry, sir, won't occur again, sir,' the formula came pat—the only contribution from Henry that ever did.

As the boy escaped by the passage door, Mr. Ellis got into his cool alpaca jacket. This garment was almost as neat and fresh as when it first came from the laundry. At the end of every day, Mr. Ellis's shirt gave little evidence of wear. He never seemed fully to inhabit his clothes.

He glanced around him now with every satisfaction. The wide high window afforded more light than the partners enjoyed downstairs. Through the modern glass door which linked him with the next room, he could see the costing clerk; his own clerk; and the cashier settling down. As this door was ajar he heard Henry interrupting: 'Chuck us a pencil,' and the elderly costing clerk's reply: 'Henry, my boy, don't make use of the word chuck—it isn't in the dick.'

Mr. Ellis shut the glass door with precision, and silence was instantly imposed on both sides.

Seating himself at his orderly desk where his own clerk had already placed the morning mail in its wire basket, he looked across at the table below the window, where lay the skin, the pounce, the pad, the round ruler, his pen with its steel nib—all the equipment for engrossing. Not a speck of dust anywhere. They had an excellent cleaner in Mrs. Hicks. It was a pity she could not turn her hand to Henry—

On the only blank wall, behind him, hung a large photogravure, framed in rosewood, of Mr. Julius Franklyn, founder of the practice. This portrait had been moved several times before it came to rest with Mr. Ellis—first from Mr. Franklyn's office, to make way for a lordly salmon caught by him in Glen Lissa, when Mrs. Franklyn, who had become a vegetarian late in life, refused to countenance it any longer. Then from Mr. Frobisher's room, when he had hung a large water-colour there of Rheims Cathedral—executed by himself. Mr.

Ellis was then honoured to receive the photogravure—indeed he had reason to believe his was the actual office in which Mr. Julius Franklyn had originally worked—before he owned the whole building. The portrait, a period piece, looked very much at home in this Georgian room. It revealed Mr. Franklyn as a vigorous horseman, standing in a tail coat with bright buttons and white velvet breeches. His gloves were stuck in his pocket, his hunting-crop under his arm. One of his muscular crossed hands grasped his hat—he was a man at the ready! Rumour had it that he had lived every day of his life, but he looked none the worse for it. The eye was notably direct, and Mr. Ellis greatly admired him.

There was a tap at the passage door. Before he could speak, it opened. Mr. Steel's secretary, Miss Cresswell stood there.

'Morning, Mr. Ellis—and how are we today? Mr. Steel would like to see you as soon as you've got through your mail. At your convenience, of course—as always!'

Miss Cresswell was a dark, trim woman of forty. Her face beneath a straight black fringe bore some resemblance to a wooden doll as she had a quick, high colour and her mouth a set smile.

'Thank you,' Mr. Ellis looked across at her. 'I'll be down.'

'Naughty, naughty!' she shook her head. 'Someone hasn't had his spectacles mended yet.'

'No,' he put up his hand protectively to his nickel-rimmed glasses. 'I've been short of time. The crack at the bridge doesn't affect the lens.'

'Now, now,' Miss Cresswell said briskly. 'I just don't think that a woolly caterpillar across Mr. Ellis's nose is quite worthy of him.'

'No,' he repeated hastily, 'probably not—I'll be down.'

Satirically she smiled. As she shut the door he breathed afresh. Miss Cresswell was the only human being whom Mr. Ellis could be said to hate.

A female secretary, in a solicitor's office, was something of an innovation, but a shortage of men in 1915 had advanced and proved her ability. Her memory rivalled Mr. Ellis's own, and she was as methodical. Not only was antipathy mutual, but she had been the first to evince it. From the start Mr. Ellis had evoked a curious levity in Miss Cresswell. 'And how is Mr.

Ellis today?' she would inquire, and he found himself diminished each time she addressed him. Younger staff, who feared her tongue, would slyly smile at his expense. On rare occasions when he was obliged to correct her in some error she would parry defeat with the statement: 'So that is how Mr. Ellis prefers matters, is it? Well, well . . . we must see what we can do to keep him happy.' She was what his grandmother would have called a constant provoke—and what Mr. Ellis privately termed a besom. When she met him in the passage or the street her sprightly smile was always glossy with a jeer. F.F. and S. had altered considerably since her arrival. She fawned on Mrs. Franklyn, the senior partner's wife; was dangerously pert to Mrs. Frobisher; flattered one half of the clients, antagonized the rest; made as much mischief as she could between the clerks; and was worshipped by the charwoman. For Mr. Steel she remained a paragon—her behaviour exemplary, her speed and ability a godsend. He could not, for the life of him, fathom why the Office had divided over the poor creature. It is true that once or twice a year, when she had worked herself to a frazzle, she would burst into tears before him, loyally refuse to betray the cause of her anguish, and have to go home in a taxi. Mr. Steel, a bachelor who had not met those strategems before, tolerantly dismissed such episodes as womanly weakness. 'The poor thing's too sensitive by half,' he told his partners, who shared his view. They were wont to admit that the only time *their* correspondence was up to date was when their own clerk was on holiday, and Miss Cresswell took over. The woman was a treasure. In vain did Mrs. Frobisher protest: 'Her rudeness to me on the telephone passes belief. And only last week she told Emily Franklyn that James Ellis, of all people, was failing fast.' 'Well,' Mr. Frobisher would reply with maddening indifference, 'Franklyn has still the evidence of *his* senses—he knows that's absurd.' Indignantly his wife would exclaim: 'That isn't the point—the point is that Cresswell is a cunning intriguer.'

But like the green bay tree, Miss Cresswell had continued to flourish for over five years at F.F. and S. None knew yet whether she was due to leave on Mr. Steel's retirement. It was the last question that Mr. Ellis felt able to ask. Too much hung on it.

Now he went downstairs as quickly as possible to Mr. Steel's room. His senior's early arrival and this request were both unusual—

Mr. Steel's office made no attempt at decoration. Densely lined with deed-boxes, it was at once larger yet less comfortable than those of the other two partners. It had only one door, which meant that Miss Cresswell in her cubicle outside was unaware of any conversation. A mahogany coat-tree stood near this door bearing the sparse fruit of Mr. Steel's summer Homburg, and his emergency umbrella smartly rolled.

Behind his wide writing-table Mr. Steel faced the door, and nodded pleasantly to Mr. Ellis as he entered. In build they were alike, but there resemblance ended for Mr. Steel's energy was of the dynamic sort, his movements swift, and his tailoring impeccable.

'Come in,' he said. 'I want to see you—an important matter. I heard last night that my nephew George is joining the practice three months before we expected—next week, in fact.'

'In view of your departure,' Mr. Ellis said tactfully, 'Mr. Dent's arrival will be very welcome. He possibly wants to settle in during the quieter summer period.'

Mr. Ellis's manner, explicit yet mild, conveyed as always a sweet reasonableness. Today for some cause, it disturbed Mr. Steel. He glanced over at this younger, yet older man seated before him—valued by his seniors and their clients; over-ridden by his own colleagues; and derided by his juniors as an amiable crackpot; and he felt both regretful and affectionate. Disturbed also, by the further news he was about to break. He had meant to postpone this till next week at, perhaps, a quiet dinner at his own club—

Then he noticed the grey wool that Mr. Ellis had wrapped tightly around the bridge of his spectacles. His secretary had again mentioned the wool that morning. The wool irritated Mr. Steel. He liked Ellis a good deal more than he liked Cresswell, but this did not prevent annoyance.

'Good lord, Ellis,' he said, 'what have you got on the bridge of your spectacles?'

Mr. Ellis took his spectacles off gingerly. 'Wool. They ought to be mended. Unfortunately they are my only pair, and I'm lost without them.'

Mr. Steel stared at him. 'One pair only—' mechanically he held out his hand for the spectacles, 'what nonsense!' he protested, and with such vigour that Mr. Ellis in his nervousness dropped the glasses on Mr. Steel's table, shattering both lenses.

'Forgive me,' Mr. Steel exclaimed, 'that was entirely my fault! Most unfortunate. Sweep it into the waste-paper tub here.'

'An envelope first,' Mr. Ellis said. 'Broken glass can be troublesome. I'll take it away with me.'

Between them they swept up the débris.

'What a confounded nuisance for you—can you see to read or write without them?'

'No—but I can get around all right.'

'Hold on—there's only one thing to do now. I'll telephone my optician in Kingsway that this is an emergency, and he must fit you out as soon as possible. And supply an extra pair. Always an essential. The complete order to be charged to the firm's account. Yes, I blame myself. Not another word.'

Within five minutes an appointment was made, and as Mr. Steel put down the receiver, Mr. Ellis said:

'I'm sorry to have put you to this trouble—and expense. Was there anything further you wished to see me about?' His grey eyes looked fragile without his spectacles—more vulnerable.

Mr. Steel hesitated for a second. 'No—that will keep till tomorrow. Better get on to Kingsway now.'

In half an hour Mr. Ellis found himself outside a very different shop from that in Kentish Town where twelve years ago he bought his last spectacles. The glass of this window was armoured plate with a bronze-metal-antique finish, and a step over the threshold sank his feet in a plushy green carpet. The silence was almost oppressive, and the four tables set for consultation were semi-curtained in green tussore. It was a bit like a superior funeral parlour—there were even some flowers in a silver vase. These spectacles were going to cost money. Two pairs too. In his professional capacity Mr. Ellis had been in any number of funeral parlours. Families often asked for him a second time. Mr. Frobisher and Mr. Steel who shunned

funerals were delighted to be represented. Now, with appropriate gravity he followed a tall gentleman in a tail-coat and striped trousers to the remotest table. Two lesser satellites, in black, like shorter, younger undertakers, remained in waiting nearer the door.

'I'm sorry I have not brought my old prescription,' Mr. Ellis said in a low voice. 'You probably need it.'

The gentleman smiled in a superior way. 'Nothing,' he assured Mr. Ellis, 'could interest us less than your old prescription. We prefer to make our own examination.' And, despite his lofty manner, this he proceeded to do with praiseworthy patience. It was again brought home to Mr. Ellis how perfunctory those Kentish Town attentions had been. The optician, advancing his black ophthalmoscope as close as possible to Mr. Ellis's face, peered through it with the utmost concentration. Tirelessly he fitted innumerable lenses. With exquisite care he raised or lowered Mr. Ellis's chin—and with paternal detachment listened while Mr. Ellis read the alphabet back to him. Mr. Ellis found these prolonged ministrations novel, and not unpleasant. With the exception of having his hair briskly cut at regular intervals by an assistant who said 'and the next!' even as he brushed off Mr. Ellis's neck, it was almost a lifetime since anyone had done anything so personal for him. The effect was soothing. For the first time that day Mr. Ellis brightened.

But not for long. The next stage at the optician's was much less satisfactory. He was escorted back to the table. A drawer was pulled out, and a bewildering number of spectacle frames displayed.

'Oh, no, I'll just have the same sort of frame that I've always had—nickel rims.'

Imperceptibly the optician shuddered. 'We do not stock those, sir. They are considered obsolete.'

Mr. Ellis was dumbfounded, but showed a last vestige of spirit. 'Those look pretty expensive,' he said.

There was a brief pause, yet like a bottomless pit a man might drown in it. Then, with deadly precision the optician announced, 'Mr. Steel has always been well satisfied with our selection. Would you prefer rolled-gold to tortoise-shell?'

Mr. Ellis who had no idea of the price of tortoise-shell, and

was shocked at the idea of rolled-gold, said firmly: 'Certainly not.' For some minutes he blindly submitted while various empty frames were balanced on his nose. Finally the optician, who had been frowning throughout this operation, announced with a calm brow and every sign of satisfaction, 'This I think. Medium-mottle.'

He swivelled a mirror for the client's benefit. Short-sighted as he was without lenses, Mr. Ellis saw enough to be horrified by his appearance. He looked downright conspicuous. The tortoise-shell frame gave him a formidable look. His inoffensive brows seemed to beetle. By nature averse to any extravagance, this dark, inflexible ridge across his face struck him as theatrical.

'Haven't you got a lighter shade of tortoise-shell?'

'I daresay we could get it for you, sir—though we understood speed was important. The blond variety is much more expensive, of course.'

Mr. Ellis's heart sank. Obdurately he said: 'I don't like it. I'm not accustomed to this type of frame.'

The optician exercised patience visibly. 'Now, sir, we must all move with the times—and in your case you can't afford to lose this particular frame.'

'How's that?' Mr. Ellis mumbled.

With some severity his antagonist replied: 'It does a great deal for you—yes, more than it does for many. It is, in fact your frame.' He now omitted the customary *sir* with which he was accustomed to sweeten counsel—not because Mr. Ellis's status had been nil since he opened his mouth, but because he was determined that this nitwit should be benefited as speedily as possible, and from experience he knew that with the ineffectual client firmness is all.

Feebly Mr. Ellis said: 'I don't feel comfortable in it.'

'Allow me,' his victor said coldly, and removed the frame with a nicety that stressed its value. 'It needs an infinitesimal adjustment on the left.'

He disappeared with the frame behind a green baize door, and was gone for the length of time it took to enjoy his usual cup of coffee at that hour.

Returning with a slight frown, he replaced the frame on Mr. Ellis's nose.

'Perfect,' he announced, with a weary little smile. 'The spectacles will be ready for you at ten tomorrow morning. And,' he added conclusively, 'this frame will give you lasting satisfaction.'

As Mr. Ellis regained the street, he was perturbed to realize how late it must be—he had been the best part of an hour in that confounded boudoir. . . .

Back at the office he managed to dictate several letters. Mr. Frobisher had gone to Court, and Mr. Steel was not expected again that afternoon.

Mr. Ellis hurried out for a late luncheon.

The Chancery Pantry was almost empty. Down a short flight of stairs it remained fairly cool in summer. His usual waitress had turned back his customary chair, to reserve this for him.

'Anything left?'

'Sausage and mash, or one steak and kidney.'

'On a day like this,' he muttered ungratefully. 'Oh, well, sausage and mash.'

The waitress, white with the effort of serving forty lunches at the double, was surprised at his tone, but brought him a glass of water. As she poured it, she let the diminishing bit of ice remain in the tumbler, although she was supposed to replace this in the jug, should it escape.

'Thank you,' Mr. Ellis said. 'I'm sorry I'm late.'

'Funny to see you without your glasses,' she said sociably. 'What's happened to them?'

'Broken.'

'What a shame—never mind! Suits you without—younger or something.' She returned to the hatch.

As she set the sausage and mash before him, she said: 'I kept your prunes for you.'

'My prunes?' he stared up at her.

'Yes—not to worry. They're okay.'

'But I don't want prunes,' he protested—almost violently.

'Not want prunes?' her mystification was complete. 'But, Mr. Ellis, you *always* have prunes on Thursdays!'

It was the culmination of his dissatisfaction.

'No,' he said, 'not today. Bring me an ice.'

'An ice?' she echoed. For years it had been an open secret

that Mr. Ellis looked on ices as a sweetmeat fit only for women and children, and this despite the café's show-card in red, white and blue: 'Popular Ices in All Flavours—Try One Today'. 'What sort?' she asked.

'A double,' he said recklessly. 'Mix them.'

The hatch, apparently, was also incredulous, for Mr. Ellis overheard the waitress explain, as she eased one foot, 'Yes, it's the heat. Not himself.'

It was only too true. He was suddenly revolted by the suggestion that he was an individual who always took prunes on Thursdays. Yet why feel injured by a supposition that had considerable evidence in its favour? The need to defend his ego had never occurred to him before. He had taken his intrinsic self for granted, and was now shocked to find that the waitress already looked on him as an automaton. A creature as conditioned as Pavlov's dog. His very annoyance alarmed him—it was beyond reason, like the irritation that he had felt all day. Why resent the waitress? If it came to that—what was his real identity? Had he any notion? A change in routine could, apparently, trip him up like a fellow falling over his own feet. He would have to watch his step. Irritability was so foreign to him that he wondered if he were sickening for something. Morbid was the word for his reaction to the prunes. . . .

At ten o'clock next morning he presented himself at the optician's, and again that gentleman insisted that he tried on both pairs. No adjustment proved necessary. Mr. Ellis was allowed to retain a pair, and the mirror was swung for his benefit.

'Shall we post the spare pair, sir?'

Mr. Ellis took a last look in the mirror, and detesting what he saw said bitterly, 'Why not?'

Yet in the street the spectacles proved so light and comfortable, their lenses so superior that by the time he reached the office he had forgotten his appearance.

Two or three people had glanced at him in passing, which was unusual—must have mistaken him for someone—but he had dismissed this by the time he hurried up the office stairs, late, but safely back to business.

The first person to receive the full impact of the tortoiseshell spectacles was Henry, idly scratching his revolting head

with Mr. Ellis's ruler, as Mr. Ellis opened his office door. 'Crikey!' Henry aghast was Henry hysterical. His guffaw was explosive.

Mr. Ellis continued to look at him, and the spectacles did the rest. In this foreign and forbidding presence Henry hastily added: 'Very sorry, sir, won't occur again, sir,' and made himself scarce.

Mr. Ellis, a man now determined to face the worst, opened the glass door dividing him from his fellows.

At once his clerk, the accountant and the cashier looked up, and remained as if turned to stone. They appeared to be stricken dumb as well. No one answered his good morning. But as he picked up a ledger he needed, and closed the door between them, he heard the lid of a desk slam, and again that stifled guffaw.

Behind his relentless tortoise-shell frame Mr. Ellis grew paler, but had no time to dwell on this affront. There on his desk lay a note from Mr. Steel requesting his immediate presence.

The clock was striking eleven as he entered Mr. Steel's room.

'Ah, there you are, Ellis—' Mr. Steel glanced up at the last word. 'Good lord,' he exclaimed, 'what an improvement! They've certainly made a success of your new spectacles. Yes, by jove,' he continued to gaze at Mr. Ellis as if he scarcely recognized him, 'these are just what you needed. I hope they're comfortable?' he added hastily, subduing enthusiasm.

'They fit well, and give clearer vision, but I look for all the world like a barn owl in them.'

'Nonsense!' Mr. Steel declared. 'They suit admirably. You look years younger in that frame. Quite formidable in fact! That's what's needed today. I much prefer your pair to mine—'

There was no doubt of his sincerity. And Mr. Steel ought to know. Mr. Ellis's colour came back—and he recovered confidence as he sat down.

'Ellis,' Mr. Steel said, 'I ought to have brought a certain matter to your notice before this. But I haven't welcomed the task. And now my nephew's arrival next week, three months

ahead of schedule, has made my delay still more remiss. I hope you will forgive me.'

To Mr. Ellis's surprise, he spoke almost diffidently.

'Of course, Mr. Steel,' he said. 'You know I'll do all I can to help Mr. Dent on arrival.'

Abruptly Mr. Steel replied, 'We've known each other over thirty years, haven't we?'

'Thirty-five,' Mr. Ellis nodded.

'Long enough for me to be regarded as a friend, I hope?'

Mr. Ellis was somewhat embarrassed, but he replied calmly enough, 'Indeed yes—thank you very much.'

'As a friend then, I'm going to speak frankly. And if you don't like what I am going to say, I ask you to believe that it is the advice I would give my own brother—were he in your position—' Mr. Steel paused, in obvious difficulty.

Mystified, Mr. Ellis prompted him. 'My position?'

Mr. Steel sat back in his chair. 'I won't beat about the bush. I'm worried about your future here. The danger is that with a new and younger partner, he might resent or ignore the advice or suggestions you are well able to give. This might make it very uncomfortable for you here with the rest of the staff.'

Astonished, Mr. Ellis replied: 'But I have always been able to fit in with Mr. Franklyn and Mr. Frobisher—and with you.'

Impatiently Mr. Steel nodded. 'I know my nephew well, and I can assure you that there will be many changes when he takes over in my place. He has always had a bee in his bonnet over this influx of men from the Forces—feels we should do what we can there. He is efficient but drastic. Personally, I'm quite glad to be leaving now. At my age, new brooms are a bore—nobody wants to live through their own mistakes again. Do I make myself plain?'

'Yes,' Mr. Ellis said quietly.

'Your position would be worse than mine,' Mr. Steel leant forward, frowning at the writing-table between them, 'for although your knowledge and experience are both exceptional, the fact remains'—again he hesitated—'you have not qualified in law.'

Their eyes met. There was no evasion on either side. Mr. Steel was the first to turn his away—

When Mr. Ellis spoke it was with his customary precision. Politely he said: 'What do you wish me to do?'

Mr. Steel drew an involuntary breath of relief. The spectral form of the Drummaldy dominie, who should by rights be haunting Franklyn, had been side-stepped. They were back in the present.

'We want you to take over the management of our country branch at Speldarch Waters. After all, it's only an hour and a half from London—so it's scarcely exile—' he glanced up for Mr. Ellis had made an inarticulate sound that was scarcely an exclamation. 'You've always got on admirably with the Ludlow brothers— Well, Edward retires in three months' time, and Frank will be delighted to welcome you then. Admittedly the practice is smaller, but we hope to transfer some of our Trust business there. Your salary will remain the same, and of course you'll have things much more your own way there. Well . . . what do you say?'

Mr. Ellis moistened his lips, which were now surprisingly dry. 'It is a big change.'

'Yes, indeed—but when you've had time to weigh this with that, I hope you won't find it unwelcome. Of course you may wish to remain in town—and we would have no right to dissuade you. Any firm would be lucky to have you, but—' he hesitated.

Mr. Ellis could follow his thought as clearly as his own. Mr. Steel was having difficulty in pointing out that a further ten or fifteen years with another firm would not entitle him to the good-will pension that would be his if he remained with F.F. and S.

'Think it over,' Mr. Steel urged.

'There is no choice,' Mr. Ellis said tonelessly.

The other gave a quick sigh. 'No. No, I realize that. And I very much regret the situation. But I also know we'd both regret your predicament still more, if you remained under changed conditions.'

'It beats me,' Mr. Ellis surprisingly exclaimed, 'it beats me why you should think that Mr. Dent and I wouldn't pull together. I've been in touch with him repeatedly at his own London office—before the war. These contacts were always cordial.'

'I daresay. He wasn't a partner then. Damn it all, Ellis, would I be urging this step if I didn't know what lies ahead at this office?'

'No,' Mr. Ellis agreed, after a moment's consideration.

Pushing back his chair, Mr. Steel rose and began to pace the floor impatiently, as if he had something else to say, but was in two minds how to express it.

'We were often short-handed during the war—and I don't forget how much we owed you then as well. But now I understand that my nephew is bringing in a friend who served with him in the same regiment—'

As he spoke Mr. Ellis had an inner flash-light photograph—he saw a youthful Major, one of Kitchener's Own, seated beneath Mr. Julius Franklyn's portrait . . . a new filing system . . . all clients regimented. By this same magnesium glare he saw (God help George Dent) old Mrs. Dugdale; the Sidgewick Syndicate; Trusts involving three generations, two of them often still alive and kicking—violently. Every complicated personal commitment behind the records. . . .

'As I say, no one's worked harder than you. Both my partners realize this. You haven't had a holiday for over a year. We want you to take the next three months as a sort of sabbatical at our expense—before starting work again in September for us . . . as we hope you will at Speldarch Waters.'

'I see,' Mr. Ellis said, his voice again toneless.

'One other point,' Mr. Steel was still pacing to and fro. 'Miss Cresswell is remaining on—those in subsidiary positions will not be so closely affected by any changes. As Mr. Dent will be handling much of my work, Cresswell's assistance will be half the battle there.'

Mr. Ellis once more moistened his lips. 'Does anyone else at the office know of—of the Speldarch Waters arrangement?'

Mr. Steel stopped sharply in his tracks. 'Of course not—only my partners and myself.'

'Thank you,' Mr. Ellis murmured. For the first time he appeared to be stricken.

Mr. Steel shot a quick glance at him, and then said angrily. 'There's a great deal about this situation that I don't like either. And if you take my advice—you'll leave on Monday evening, when I do. Then, as far as the staff here is concerned—we've

gone together. And any future arrangement is your own business and choice.'

'Thank you,' Mr. Ellis repeated, but this time more distinctly. It was inescapably plain that the partners wanted him out of the place before George Dent arrived—but equally clear that Mr. Steel meant to save his face.

His face—what the devil did his face matter! Suddenly Mr. Ellis's brain began to function normally. The plight of F.F. and S. met him fair and square. Was it conceivable that the partners had less interest in the practice than he himself had? Their incredible obtuseness affected him as a lapse of sanity would have done—

He rose, his mien altered. Fiercely he said: 'And what is going to happen to this place with us both gone at the same time?'

Again Mr. Steel averted his gaze. Ellis's anguish was now selfless, and it afflicted him afresh, yet sharply he retorted: 'They will learn—but no longer at my expense. And I hope not at yours. Again I urge you to leave on Monday. Give them a clear field on Tuesday—for they will take it.'

Mr. Ellis bowed. 'As you wish,' he said stiffly. 'I suppose they know what they are doing—'

'No, they don't. But I do. I ask you to trust me.'

Mr. Ellis drew in his breath painfully, and then briefly said: 'I do.' As he turned away, Mr. Steel added: 'Come and see me on Monday—won't you?'

The other looked round and smiled politely. 'Of course—any time that suits you.'

He had almost reached the door when Mr. Steel called out again: 'One minute! Do me a favour. One of the drawbacks of marriage is the trousseau. Get into my overcoat—I want to approve the fit. I think we're much of a size.'

'Your overcoat?' Dully Mr. Ellis noted that today there was a summer-weight overcoat on the mahogany tree. He wondered if he had heard his senior aright.

'I want to approve the fit,' Mr. Steel repeated.

Somewhat clumsily Mr. Ellis got into the coat. Then pulling himself together, he adjusted it, and obediently turned round.

'All right,' Mr. Steel announced. 'Now oblige me by trying on the hat.'

'Your hat?' Mr. Ellis was suddenly acutely self-conscious despite his misery, but making a supreme effort he placed Mr. Steel's Homburg on his head. Mercifully it fitted, and with such hardihood as he could muster he gazed back at Mr. Steel.

'Yes . . . yes—nothing the matter with that either,' and as Mr. Ellis hurriedly divested himself of hat and coat, he added with his usual brisk bonhomie: 'For this wedding of mine I've had to get a new outfit, which leaves me with a respectable wardrobe without a wearer. Now, I've no relation to whom I can pass on these clothes. That's why I hope you'll do me a favour by accepting them. Coats, suits, and linen are now back from the cleaner, and my man has packed them in three large suitcases which I'll bring in on Monday—if you'll help me out in this matter?'

'Thank you, Mr. Steel,' Mr. Ellis said, still dazed. 'It is very kind of you.'

'In this way,' Mr. Steel told him, 'you can take the suitcases back by taxi yourself, and no one at your Chambers will be any wiser.' Unexpectedly he crossed the floor, and shook the other's hand heartily. 'I feel I've said my say very clumsily, but you know as well as I do how much I value all you've done here.'

Once the door had closed on Mr. Ellis, he returned to his writing-table oddly disturbed again—not by these arrangements which he believed were the best he could contrive under existing circumstances, but by the spectacle of Ellis in his own coat and hat.

In properly tailored clothes Ellis looked a very different person. He might have been anyone—or rather, someone of importance. And it suddenly seemed grossly unfair that lacking a coat from Savile Row and a hat from Scott's, he should be relegated to the background.

The irksome truth was that Franklyn had snared him too young.

Had James Blair Ellis taken the necessary examinations at the appointed time, his destiny would have been a partnership—and not a backwater now.

4. Mr. Ellis's Storm, afternoon

As Mr. Ellis walked upstairs to his own office, he felt unnaturally calm—slightly disembodied, in fact. Yet his mind had never been sharper, and during the rest of the day he disposed of his work in the usual way. He did not go out for lunch—last night's thunder had done little to clear the air, and today's oppression was worse. No one could eat in such heat—

Henry, to whom the loss of a meal amounted to misery, brought him an unsolicited cup of tea at three o'clock, and a chocolate biscuit purloined from Mr. Franklyn's tin. Absently Mr. Ellis consumed both.

Later, homeward bound on the top of a 'bus, the air felt tepid, and the fume of petrol awoke another nausea.

'Is there anything more I could have done,' he wondered, 'all those years?'

As one who searches for an error in his reckoning he pondered where he had gone wrong.

But this sickly phase did not last longer than a penny 'bus stage. His service had been irreproachable, and he knew it. The sky, leaden above the careering 'bus, and sulphur-coloured ahead, revealed the familiar street in a new light. This was his fate and that was the explanation. No calamity—just a misfortune.

He got off the 'bus with a growing conviction that he had dreamt all this before, and was startled by a sense of mystery

—as if Baker Street itself stood for a great deal more than he had ever realized.

Cholmondeley Chambers, as he entered, was pleasantly cool and quiet. His yesterday's distaste for it had vanished with all that irritation. Upstairs was his own bedroom at last . . . safety—home.

Closing its door, the summer storm broke outside in volley after volley of thunder. The window flashed with lightning, and he left it slightly open at the bottom. It did him good to smell the rain—brickdust at first, it would soon freshen in this downpour, as the soot and grime ran off the house.

By the time he had washed and changed his jacket, the air in the room was just what he needed—

Gratefully he sat down in it.

The room was fairly large but rather empty. Apart from the bed and a small wardrobe, it contained an armchair, and an upright one beside a somewhat inadequate writing-table. This last held his two books from the lending library. Below was a waste-paper-basket which acted as a paper-rack for his daily newspaper. The room held one ornament—a photograph of his mother in a leatherette travelling frame, standing on top of the Gideon Bible on the mantelpiece. Each day the maid moved the photograph on to the Bible—Mr. Ellis never understood why . . . unless it was to make a clean-sweep when dusting. The various women who had dusted this photograph at Cholmondeley Chambers and his other lodgings often took it for his wife—he had the subdued, settled look of a widower. Some of them felt sorry for him, as they dusted, for the young woman had a thin, eager face and dark expressive eyes, quite unlike Mr. Ellis's cool orbs. It was felt that she must have warmed him up—he had little enough to say for himself now.

Glancing at the mantelpiece, Mr. Ellis saw that the photograph was still on top of the Bible. As a rule he moved it off, as he entered, but tonight he must have forgotten . . . His mother had been a teacher at Barras school before she married his father, and quite irrelevantly now he remembered she had written some poetry from time to time which had been published by the *Drumgelder Herald*. His grandmother used to say it had caused quite a stir at Barras. Five years ago,

alarmed by the way the photograph was fading, he had had two copies made by a photographer in Baker Street. One of these copies was now in the leatherette frame. The other copy, with the original, was locked in that trunk against the wall—the trunk he'd brought from Croft Knock thirty-five years ago. It held also his own Bible, together with his birth certificate, and a few letters from his grandmother. In winter the trunk contained his summer clothes, and in summer his winter outfit, and was pungent with moth-balls. Hidden in one corner of it was a neat object in a screw of paper—a small velvet box with a gold medal in mint condition, awarded to him as Dux of Drumgelder High School, and which had never been opened since his grandmother died. Handy to the bed was a modest oak bookcase, with a few books on heraldry and travel, a good many more on astronomy and geology—including Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, and Hugh Miller's *Old Red Sandstone*, Robert Burns's *Poetical Works* and McTaggart on *Some Dogmas of Religion*.

It was a sober room, but tonight he found it wholly refreshing. He decided, however, to go down to dinner without his new spectacles. The dining-room had seen him without any last night and this morning—and he felt he'd had enough drama for one day.

He walked down slowly, his hand on the rail, for his room was on the third floor, looking much as usual—so he thought.

The dining-room was rather empty, but a few minutes after he got there, Mr. Simms's small rotund figure entered. Horace's step had shortened before its time, and he proceeded with the shuffling gait of a child playing trains. Instead of whistling, he beamed pleasantly—the day had been longish but dinner was his favourite meal, and sometimes James spent the evening with him afterwards.

As he reached the two tables, at which they sat side by side, he did not give the customary greeting. To Mr. Ellis's astonishment, he stopped short and gazed at him in concern. Out of delicacy, Mr. Simms spelled his query: 'Anything U.P.?' he asked.

Mr. Ellis, who intended telling Horace later, merely said: 'Been pretty warm in the city.'

'Quite,' Horace said quickly, and sat down heavily. He did not speak again, and Mr. Ellis found himself making conversation. To this Horace nodded vigorously, without glancing round.

Mr. Ellis waited until the maid had withdrawn after placing a plateful of cold tongue and salad and a dish of mashed potatoes on each table. Then he said: 'Funny you noticed—it must be the heat—but I did get a bit of a shock earlier today. All over now, of course, and I'm quite ready for my dinner.'

'Yes.' Horace was still transfixing a bottle of Heinz mayonnaise on his own table.

'I knew there were changes coming at the office, of course. Mr. Steel retiring, a new partner arriving—but I had no idea these would be so wholesale. For one thing Mr. Dent was not expected till September.'

'No,' Horace echoed.

'Well, he's arriving next week. Tuesday to be precise. Bringing an army friend.'

'Oh,' Horace lowered his gaze to the tablecloth.

'And the partners want me to join the country branch at Speldarch Waters—same salary, in September,' he paused.

Mr. Simms made no reply, but raising his eyes stared ahead into space.

'They must have had this up their sleeve for some time. Now, of course, they're upset—as they've had to give me short notice. They suggest a three months' bonus . . . they want me to leave on Monday.'

'My God,' Mr. Simms exclaimed.

Mr. Ellis felt curiously mollified. It was Horace's nearest approach to violence in the ten years that he had known him. Nothing further was said. Mr. Ellis was relieved that Horace made no further comment. He didn't want to defend the partners—which he'd have had to do, with insincerity.

As the meal progressed in comparative silence, and the chocolate shape was replaced by Scotch Woodcock, Mr. Ellis reflected on the irrelevance of existence. It had taken thirty-five years of sustained effort to build up his position at F.F. and S. Stone Buildings; and now it no longer existed there.

Yet this friendship with Horace, an effortless, feather-weight matter of glance, greeting and sympathy, could sound one's depth, and take the strain.

'Coffee upstairs?' Mr. Ellis suggested. This was always the sign that he meant to spend the evening in the lounge with Horace.

There, they found that the rain had ceased, and that the sulphur sky had cleared. The big west window glistened with the last light of the day, a sunset more like a watery dawn.

Tonight they achieved the Moorish-inlaid table which was just the right height for the leather sofa with the sound springs—the one beneath the palm tree. Mr. Wotherspoon had a way of removing this table to his niche opposite. They congratulated each other. And the coffee proved to be really hot—

Mr. Ellis now felt able to take out his new spectacle case. The spectacles, he explained, were not what he would have chosen—but time had been against him. They were a bit conspicuous—

Mr. Simms looked at them with interest, as he opened them. 'No, no,' he assured him, 'that's a handsome job. Anyone would think they were tortoise-shell. It's just that anything new is a change—you'll soon get used to them.' Nor did he glance again at Mr. Ellis once he had assumed them. Instead, 'Care for a game of draughts?' Horace ventured. 'Or perhaps not?'

'Why not?' Mr. Ellis agreed.

Mr. Simms won. He sometimes did when he played with Mr. Ellis, but on this occasion it was a genuine victory. Mr. Ellis's mind was elsewhere.

5. Mr. Ellis's Storm, evening

Mr. Ellis's state of calm lasted throughout the weekend. He walked through Regent's Park on Saturday afternoon, took a tram to Parliament Hill Fields, and found himself on Hampstead Heath with the same detachment. Kenwood, the Spaniard's, and Jack Straw's Castle were all at one remove.

The sky was a brilliant blue today, but distant islands of cloud had a glazed look as these formations rose above London like dazzling volcanoes. The landscape on the north horizon brooded in heat that had quickened its violet, grey, and olive recesses, without yet veiling these.

On Heath Street, cafés had set out chairs on the narrow pavement, under striped awnings. He sat down at one. Everywhere, people had slowed down—as today sweat did not simply rise, it ran down glistening brows and sticky arms. Feet became first thick, then clubbed in dusty shoes. Iced drinks proved tepid at a second mouthful, iced food languished even as it was served. Mr. Ellis, an experienced walker, drank hot tea without milk . . . but as he sat there, time again telescoped for him, and he knew the midnight thunder ahead for the heath—felt a chill breeze rise on the soaking scene. Then the experience was over. Had already passed with history. And this scorching day would revive in memory without its drawbacks, during cold or wet winters, as that wonderful summer when the whole land swam in sunshine—remember?

Uneasily, Mr. Ellis altered his position on the narrow café seat. He was apparently still suffering a bit from shock. No doubt it would take a day or two . . . And more than his sabbatical three months (one of which was already owing to him) to adjust to Speldarch Waters.

'They've no idea how much I've done each day,' he was reflecting, 'it's gone on too long.'

But worse than any personal humiliation had been the realization that men running a practice like F.F. and S. could make such a gross error of judgement—for it knocked the sense out of all his labour there.

Qualified men—the adjective sprang unbidden. His face grew whiter.

The inconceivable folly of allowing two active members, in key positions, to leave together—such indifference to the interest of the practice amounted to a lapse of reason.

It was this realization in Mr. Steel's office that had acted on him like a cold douche of truth—separating him from the situation. He had been obliged, from that moment, mentally and morally to reject Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel—and in so doing had, in a sense, died to himself there.

No doubt this had left him with the present disembodied feeling—it would take a little more time, he decided, to recover. . . .

On Sunday evening Mr. Ellis went to Church. Not with any idea of comfort—his present trouble was a matter between him and the office, and would remain there—but because it was that Sunday in the month on which he usually attended the Presbyterian Church. Mr. Ellis did not go every Sunday by any means, but he attended for Communion four times each year, and was faithful to his selected Sunday evenings. Sometimes the Hislops joined him—tonight he was alone.

He found he was a little early, but the Church was pleasantly cool. People trickled in—by ones and twos. Looked like a sparse attendance. The voluntary ended with the entrance of the Choir . . . more people there than in the nave itself—too bad! It was rather a stolid, heavy building but Mr. Ellis thought none the worse of it for that. It had been built to last, and the three eastern stained-glass windows

were fine specimens. Money would not be frittered until the same standard could be repeated on the blank ones.

For the first time, he was arrested by the fact that this substantial building should exist for his benefit too. He had done nothing to justify this, except make a small donation on each visit. Yet at enormous expense, in both money and labour this fabric had been raised by strangers for strangers—to the glory of God. Long before the architect's plans were on the table, there must have been exhaustive efforts, endless appeals, drastic decisions, and a voluminous and daunting correspondence with all manner of men—and officialdom. Mr. Ellis felt suddenly bloodless as he envisaged the agreements alone. The heatwave had again got him down—

But at that moment the Beadle carried in the Bible, and Mr. Ellis saw nothing else. Every Presbyterian present watched the Beadle with the attention of a judge observing a witness take his oath.

With dignity the Beadle mounted the pulpit, solemnly laid the Book down, reverently opened it, with precision inserted the marker. Then, descending, he stood aside for the Minister to pass—correctitude itself. He would do.

The Minister was a stranger. He too was scrutinized, although less keenly than the Beadle had been. Mr. Ellis felt the sparse attendance was something of an affront to their visitor—but a dispassionate calm was this gentleman's most obvious characteristic. Mr. Ellis noted that he had a legal look. The cool, crisp voice reading the Lesson made its surprising statements sound factual.

'Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thy habitations; spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes . . . Fear not; for thou shalt not be put to shame . . . No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper . . . This is the heritage of the servants of God.'

What of the martyrs? Mr. Ellis thought glumly, and remembered, with the frigid chill of confirmation, Jesus Himself upon the cross—

But as he did so, truth again in piercing freed him. Aftermath meant after-grass in stubble to any crofter, from that day to this. For a split-second the past amplified itself as part of the living present—and this in turn revealed an

expanding future. All this was true of time—Isaiah had but stated fact. Eternity remained another region of experience—mercifully inviolate. Man had been granted the best of both worlds after all!

That night, back in the Sunday stupor of Cholmondeley Chambers, he slept soundly. . . .

6. Mr. Ellis's Storm, night

Monday was cooler. There had been another deluge in the night. As he walked towards the office, a fine rain still descended from a stagnant grey sky. A little wind arose . . . rain ceased, and the sun danced out.

Soberly he walked up the steps on this his last morning. . . .

At ten o'clock he had a surprise. Mr. Steel came upstairs to Mr. Ellis's office—sat down and spent the best part of an hour there. With him he brought the Agreement relating to the Speldarch Waters branch. Once this was examined, and signed, the signatures witnessed by Mr. Ellis's clerk, who had no notion what it all meant—Mr. Steel showed a disposition to linger.

Dryly Mr. Ellis said: 'In bidding you goodbye today, I don't intend to take leave of anyone else.'

'Well, you're certainly not saying goodbye to Franklyn and Frobisher, for that matter. But I think it's quite smart of you to leave any explanation to them. They'll have to say less than you would! As for myself, I shall be constantly in touch with you, once I return from this honeymoon of mine.'

Mr. Steel's manner was a shade less brisk today. He had begun to pace Mr. Ellis's room as if it were his own. At the window he paused, and both men looked out, Mr. Ellis seated behind him.

After the deluge, the blue sky was veined throughout with

streaks of filmy cloud which seemed like aerial marble disintegrating before their eyes.

'It's too bad,' Mr. Steel remarked without looking round. 'I seem to have hustled you away, but I have my reasons. I can only ask you again to trust me.'

'Ah, well,' Mr. Ellis replied. 'I don't suppose a week here or there would have altered the picture much.'

Mr. Steel gave a short laugh, and continued to stare out of the window. 'Don't you believe it,' he said.

Mr. Ellis could not follow his train of thought, and anyway was now past caring.

Abruptly Mr. Steel turned round. 'Well, I'd better get on with it. As I've said—I hope to see you on my return to town. You're certainly the last man here that I'd wish to bid goodbye—' and he walked towards the desk. 'By the way, I've said nothing to the staff—not even Miss Cresswell.'

'Thank you,' Mr. Ellis nodded.

'I've told her to keep the three suitcases in her room for you. No one will see them there. I brought them this morning.'

'Thank you,' Mr. Ellis repeated stonily.

Mr. Steel laid an envelope on the desk. 'The keys are there—well,' he added briefly, 'we'll meet later . . .' and hurried from the room.

That woman, these three suitcases—to Mr. Ellis it was the final ignominy that she should know just what these meant. . . .

In the afternoon he spent the last hour going over certain transactions with his clerk. His secretary was an intelligent fellow, and everything was in order, but any practice was a great deal more than the sum total of its paper work. Its submerged bulk represented the enigmatic personal element, with its possibility of collision. He did not envy Mr. George Dent's army friend the Multrovers' case, or the negotiations over the Huddersfield property. The Sidgewick Syndicate was a perpetual headache—it had to be nursed like a multiple injury. None knew better than he the importance of unremitting vigilance—and it was precisely this devotion that was most difficult to secure, or to instil. And all the time this routine work went on, people continued to die; fresh properties had to be bought; wills were made; deeds drawn up; powers of attorney granted—

It was not until he was alone at four o'clock that the personal affront to his own work struck him again—that humiliation which is the worst that can afflict a strenuous and conscientious man. He had been hit; and as yet did not know how badly.

He decided he would go down to Miss Cresswell's room right away, and get that over.

Nervously he adjusted the tortoise-shell spectacles. Miss Cresswell had not yet seen those, although well he knew that their fame had spread.

He tapped once on her door, and entered before she could reply—he scarcely recognized himself in this effrontery.

Neither apparently did Miss Cresswell. Her derision was undisguised as she glanced up and saw his spectacles frowning rigidly and expensively at her.

'Well, well, well,' her nod of congratulation was bright with malice, 'enter Mr. Ellis and his Spectacles—come right in, if there's room for both of you!'

'Thank you,' he said coldly. 'I understand there's some luggage for me here.'

Negligently she jerked her pen towards three handsome leather suitcases, on which Mr. Steel had had the initials J.B.E. stamped.

'Someone always manages to fall on his feet, doesn't he?' she inquired.

Mr. Ellis, who had meant to carry the suitcases out, stopped short. For the first time he looked at her with the detestation he had always felt—As she told the cashier later, 'his eyes snapped with green light, like a demon's!'

It was then that Miss Cresswell made her fatal remark to Mr. Ellis—a little joke scarcely worse than many she had made at his expense. Nodding to the suitcases, she said:

'A regular Cinder-Ellis, aren't you?'

Mr. Ellis drew in a breath that pinched his nostrils, then he distinctly said: 'That will do, Miss Bo-Peep! Just 'phone for my taxi—and then tell Henry to carry down my luggage.'

Unmasked, they stared at each other. A second later Miss Cresswell astonished herself by saying, with a sniff:

'Certainly, Mr. Ellis—anything to oblige, I'm sure!'

Turning away, he thought of that fierce school-boy fight

on the road to Barras, yet found today's had been more punishing. . . .

During the rest of the week, the irritability that had ushered in Mr. Ellis's misfortune was replaced by a depression as hard to bear. Neither the Hislops' sympathy nor Horace's devotion eased this much. Hetty Hislop was fiercely indignant on his behalf. 'But I've always said it—man is the lowest form of life. For reliability give me a man-eating tiger!'

At the same time Mr. Ellis was astonished by his three friends' panic at the prospect of his removal to Speldarch Waters—astonished but gratified. •

Cholmondeley Chambers had not yet heard this news, but all week had been in a ferment over Mr. Ellis's affairs. First, there had been the spectacular horn spectacles, for nobody imagined that these were tortoise-shell, except Mr. Wother-spoon, the Chambers' one rich resident, who knew beans when he saw them. The spectacles had started the revolution. The lounge agreed that it was much less easy to chaff him now. As young Mr. Gedge, assistant in the tropical section at Gamages, said: "The spectacles put up a bit of a barrage—what?" And behind their inflexible front Mr. Ellis still found they took some living down.

Then on Tuesday two large cardboard boxes arrived from a tailor in Savile Row and a hat-box with Scott's label on it. Mr. Ellis was the last to see these in the hall, as he did not expect them. The size of the tailor's boxes suggested overcoats to every resident who studied these. Furthermore, by Tuesday evening the night porter stated that he had helped Mr. Ellis to carry three suitcases upstairs the previous day, and as these were heavy as lead had received sixpence for his trouble. Each case, he testified, had borne Mr. Ellis's initials, and a leather-label cover such as Finnigan had not set eyes on before. This story of the suitcases was taken with a pinch of salt until Mr. Ellis appeared in the first selection from his trousseau. Earlier no one could understand why he was not at the office. The only time each year that Mr. Ellis failed to catch the morning 'bus was when he went on holiday. But Mr. Ellis gave no sign of going to Cromer. A comparative

stranger to the Chambers, Mr. Pope from soft-goods, Pontings, suggested that possibly Mr. Ellis had been sacked. This was treated with the contempt it deserved—residents at the Chambers were not subject to such indignities. But suspense mounted, for the idea that men gossip less than women is one of the few illusions that women still entertain about the sterner sex. An attempt was made to sound Simms, but that silly old fool simply cupped his ear with his hand, and asked the discreet inquirer to speak louder, as his hearing was worse today.

Then on Wednesday Mr. Ellis got into his new clothes with arresting results. Mr. Ellis himself was not sensitive to sartorial nuances. When he unpacked the clothes he noticed only their superiority in material and certain luxurious details—a satin lining here, a chamois-leather finish there. The clothes appeared to fit him—in the case of the various overcoats better than his own. Once he had got into one of Mr. Steel's freshly laundered shirts, and an admirably pressed suit, he thought no more about either, in his bedroom. Mr. Steel's hats, however, gave him a slight uneasiness. These consisted of a bowler and three Homburgs, and their definitive style penetrated even his simplicity. He decided that perhaps his own hat, though rather shabby, would make less of a change. But no sooner had he tried this on with the new clothes—fortunately in his bedroom—than he saw that it did not mate with Mr. Steel's tailormade. He now had a bogus look, and it was his own hat that was wrong for him. Worried, he replaced it before his mirror with the least striking of the Homburgs, and at once hat and suit looked at home.

Relieved, he went downstairs to breakfast, once more oblivious of his appearance, but this had now altered remarkably.

The dining-room, astonished by his Savile Row cut concluded instantaneously that he had come into money, and noting his unusually dour expression decided that he had been bereaved as well.

Mr. Simms, however, denied that there had been any funeral, but failed to explain why Mr. Ellis still did not get off to business as he should each morning. Twice that week,

too, the Hislops had come to dinner with him—a most unusual extravagance.

If Mr. Ellis had lost his job, as Mr. Pope again suggested, it looked as if he had also lost his head. All those new clothes—his very shirts had changed. A neat and natty stripe now, worn with a small-check tie. 'He'll be out in white spats yet,' young Mr. Gedge of Gamages had prophesied.

On Friday there had been a fresh sensation. A packing-case of wine arrived from a Piccadilly merchant, and, as Mr. Muspratt was at the Bank, the case was left in the hall where every resident examined it except Mr. Ellis himself. Mr. Wotherspoon padded out of his ground-floor suite in carpet slippers to study the label, and later declared: 'I told you so. A wealthy widow in pursuit. His days among us are now numbered.'

This view was confirmed on Saturday night when half a bottle of wine was served to each guest dining at Cholmondeley Chambers. Nor were the waitresses later forgotten. A princely gesture that left each inmate pleasantly lit by nine o'clock—except Mr. Ellis, who continued to look bereaved.

So strong now was the conviction that Mr. Ellis was on his way out that Mr. Kemp, a teller at Barclays Bank, and a personage of considerable standing at the Chambers, had the temerity to by-pass Mr. Muspratt and, securing the ear of Colonel Waters, the chairman of the Cholmondeley Chambers board, ask for the first refusal of Mr. Ellis's garden-view bedroom, when it should be vacated. Colonel Waters at once questioned Mr. Muspratt as to Mr. Ellis's departure, stating that Mr. Kemp was tired of the regurgitation of the water-cistern next to his present bedroom—

Mr. Muspratt could not contain his ire, but waited until Mr. Kemp publicly passed through the hall with the others. Then, regardless of the lustre afforded by Barclays Bank, he attacked Mr. Kemp in these words: 'I am the manager of this establishment—and the first to be informed of any change. If and when Number 22 is vacated, the price at once goes up to meet altered conditions. I contemplate no other change.'

Slyly Gamages nudged Mr. Wotherspoon: '*Vengeance is mine, I will repay*—what can you say to God?'

On Sunday night, before the Hislops left the Chambers they again urged Mr. Ellis to take his holiday now, but Mr. Ellis was reacting to Cromer exactly as he had done to prunes on Thursday.

On his way up to bed, he realized that what he needed was a complete change rather than a holiday—yet he lacked the nerve to make any. He decided that he would give himself another day or so—then he would act.

As he undressed, his mind reverted again to the extraordinary way in which he had been hustled out of the London office. He could not get over this. Mr. Frobisher's farewell had been that usually bestowed when Mr. Ellis went on holiday—instead of into exile at Speldarch Waters. Mr. Frobisher had merely omitted the phrase: 'Have a good time.' Instead he had said: 'We'll be having another talk in September, before you leave for Speldarch Waters.' Mr. Franklyn he had not seen—he was out of town. But Mr. Ellis was certain that he too would have skated round the awkward situation. Possibly they were ashamed.

Why humour Mr. Dent to this foolhardy extent? That was what confounded Mr. Ellis. Admittedly he was a new and important partner—a rich one too—bringing increased business to the firm. Yet even so. . . .

No, there was more to all this than met the eye. But for the life of him he couldn't put his finger on it.

Mr. Dent had evidently insisted on having the coast clear—and they had given him his head. But it would be at a price—Mr. Ellis, who knew more about the practice than any of them, knew that also!

Perplexed, he got into bed and put the light out. That phrase: *the coast clear* continued to drum senselessly on his attention.

Somewhere he had read that when a problem proves insoluble the answer is never in it—but beyond. He felt no sympathy with this notion, for his mind was mathematically inclined.

Yet patiently he proceeded to ponder this—until sleep released him.

7. Mr. Ellis's Aftermath

Next morning after breakfast, and closely observed by the other residents, Mr. Ellis again made his way to the lounge instead of catching a 'bus to the office. There it was noted he read the morning paper in a leisurely fashion, exchanged a few words with Mr. Simms, and then retired to his bedroom.

Through this window another flawless May day of complete boredom presented itself. Mr. Ellis decided to take a turn down Bond Street to St. James's. He dismissed as nonsense a swift suspicion that his new clothes were now taking him, by unaccustomed routes, to their own habitat.

Reluctantly he continued to gaze through the window at those meagre trees in their early summer foliage. Here he was, in another man's clothes, about to take a walk at leisure—a leisure which he very much resented. An odd inertia had overcome him those last days. He had not only slowed down—he seemed to have come to a halt. Every movement was an effort. Had this period of relaxation come too late for him to enjoy it? Had he been strenuous so long that opportunities of leisure were now beyond him? A grim possibility—

Gazing absently, he was suddenly aware of the curious nature of the circumstances that awaited every human creature at birth. For the first time it struck him that these bore no resemblance to his intrinsic being. In comparison they were almost grotesque. Yet both environment and events could scarcely be dismissed as a dream—these were too explicit.

And it was this very explicitness that abruptly revealed their nature to Mr. Ellis. The mother's milk, the effort to stand upright, swift thought's slow descent to fumbling speech, this prelude to succeeding drama—the whole extraordinary experience was a parable.

With this realization that a parable was expounded, he was, for once, directly aware of an unseen Expounder—even as he gazed from the window.

It was the culmination of Mr. Ellis's whole existence. He now *knew* that which he had last surmised in Church.

The intensity of the experience was such that bliss suffused him, from relief beyond expression. The moment was a recognition of a truth known to him an infinity ago—before breath had separated heaven from earth . . . and long since lost.

Its aftermath, as he turned from the window, was a profound calm, as spacious as it was complete. This in its turn, without changing its reality, passed into a sober sêrenity as he went downstairs. The wound of the past ten days was still there, but no longer mortal. His daily life, rigid with limitation and drained by frustration, flowed freely in another channel.

The street as he stepped into it was as it had always been, its morning commonplace unaltered. The traffic roared, pedestrians jostled, a newsboy shouted, but all with a fresh significance.

He decided on Regent's Park instead of St. James's—and without a moment's hesitation.

He entered by Clarence Gate and walked towards the Broad Walk. The hawthorns were in full foam, the flowerbeds ablaze with azaleas, tulips and auriculas. The shade of the trees was welcome as he approached a certain seat, placed with its back to Cambridge Terrace. Mr. Ellis had an affection for this particular seat. During the past decade, by sitting on it repeatedly he had rendered it his own. Always it was empty too—another pleasant feature. Today was no exception, although there were a number of people strolling through—nursemaids with children, one or two loving couples, and several solitaires like himself.

Mr. Ellis had not been seated more than five minutes

when a pale, solemn young man stopped opposite, took off his black hat politely and asked what time it was.

Mr. Ellis told him.

The young man thanked him, then added surprisingly: 'God bless you, sir, you've helped me. Perhaps I can help *you*. Allow me—'

He handed Mr. Ellis a small text, like a visiting-card, and walked away. He did not stop at another seat until he was some distance off. Then Mr. Ellis noticed an elderly woman consulting her watch, and receiving, apparently, another text. It was evidently part of a routine. Mortals were introduced to eternity through time!

Mr. Ellis looked at his text again.

'Joshua 1 verse 3,' he read, 'Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread that have I given unto you.' And in slightly smaller type below, an admonition: 'Think about this.'

He wondered what he should do with the thing. There was a waste-paper receptacle further along, but he scarcely liked to throw it away at once—or into a public waste-bin. The words were Scriptural.

He slipped the white card into his wallet. As he did so it occurred to him that the words most aptly fitted his earlier insight that morning. Comical but true. Ah, well, it would all work out—he knew that now. . . .

It had been pleasant sitting there in this early summer warmth. The whole day belonged to him. He no longer felt harassed, exhausted, but pleasantly lazy. He could not remember ever feeling quite like this before. Mellow was the nearest he could get to it. He thought now that he'd get up, and walk along the Ring—

Then he decided to wait another minute—sixty seconds, neither more nor less!

And in waiting this additional minute, the sixty seconds, neither more nor less, he altered finally his whole life, and that of three other strangers.

Or did he merely confirm destiny? Years later he often wondered.

Meantime, on the Regent's Park seat that Monday morning, preparatory to rising from it, idly he began to count the seconds of this minute—one, two, three, four. . . .

Part II

8. Mrs. Betterton-Best's Lull

Mrs. Betterton-Best's crisis was to run neck and neck with Mr. Ellis's, but unlike him she had no foreboding, no preliminary gloom. Her lull on that initial Thursday when Mr. Ellis rejected his prunes, was genuine. She was her serene and sunny self as she dressed for breakfast—the balcony of her wide bedroom brilliant with sunshine, the air balmy from her hidden garden embedded like an open secret in Regent's Park itself. So cunningly had the situation of the house been contrived that, although the upper windows commanded extensive views, these windows like the garden below were concealed from the public. She could stand there in her muslin wrap, framed by wistaria's purple tassels, knee-deep in clambering geraniums, and remain unseen by all—except chaffinch, tit, blackbird and thrush for which the Villa's garden was sanctuary.

The entrance façade on the far side of the house was a formal disclosure of beauties beyond. Two massive Doric pillars supported that unique entablature on which twin sphinxes looked east and west. Between these, rising two storeys in height, was the four columned window of the gallery, with its exquisite fanlight—the Pharaoh's eye, as she fondly named it. On the dullest day that northern light was always calm, clear, totally different at any hour from the light that swam above the staircase from the central dome of the house. That came from such a summit that its

tranquillity was that of distance . . . a picture transformed to life—and not, as so often happens to the ambitious artist, life rendered static.

Although today was Thursday, from a bright blue zenith the solitude and silence of some golden Sunday hung over the heart of her home—as down the open staircase she went now, its wrought-iron leafage delicate as lace against the ivory walls.

At the bottom, like fallen sunshine, was the imperial yellow of a circular Chinese carpet, for despite statuary, pictures, *objets d'art*, Mrs. Betterton-Best's taste decreed that this house should be a home, and not a museum. So perfect, too, were the Georgian proportions of each room and corridor that a feeling of intimacy was preserved even in her Grecian drawing-room.

Cool as a lettuce leaf she passed swiftly into the outer hall, and there an involuntary groan escaped her. Her mail lay scattered on the marble floor. A poignant reminder that Marco, her major-domo, had now been dead two months, and that his like would never again be met this side of time.

Marco had run the Villa for twenty years with the art that conceals effort. Genius, in fact. He might be described as Mr. Betterton-Best's wedding-present to her—for he had been with them from the start of their honeymoon until ten years after his master's demise. Now she knew what she had often suspected—that Marco's services were the most valuable of all those priceless gifts that Charles had lavished on her. Marco had been the genie of the lamp. On those rare occasions when a cook proved too temperamental to be borne, Marco had simply gone one better in his next choice. Her friends always chorused that her servants only left to be married. And since Marco's death this had again proved true. But now there was no Marco to find replacements. For the past ten years—since Charles's death, in fact, her staff had certainly not been numerous. Marco had always done a great deal more than his own work—he preferred it that way.

Quickly she stooped, deftly picked up the letters from numerous registry offices, placed these on a salver, and bore them into the chintz morning-room, where her canary was chirping in frenzies for her—and where breakfast awaited.

Mrs. Ruddick could not cook—she was a cleaner, but she could at least brew tea. And in that spate of mail today there might be the next best butler in the world!

So far, every man whom she had interviewed since Marco's death had declined point-blank to stoke the boiler-furnace, which supplied the life-blood of the Villa's comfort. On the principle that the Guards don't dance, British butlers, presumably, did not stoke. The furnace had been Marco's pride—no female had been allowed to touch it. Applicants for Marco's post now suggested that the gardener stoked. Crisply Mrs. Betterton-Best explained that she had no resident gardener—that a firm of nurserymen supplied two gardeners each day till noon, and for five days only in the week. This had been Mr. Betterton-Best's inspired arrangement. A resident gardener owns your garden, and is not to be borne, he had warned. And this system had worked perfectly, as all else, during Marco's lifetime. Each prospective butler now grasped instantly that if the gardener stoked each morning, there later remained a serious hiatus. Had Madam no odd-job man about the place, or a scullery-hand who could attend to this detail? Useless to tell them that Marco had been these—and all else beside. The most dignified major-domo, into the bargain, who ever received, announced, and dispatched in state. And ever a silent yet sympathetic influence at her elbow. Those pompous servants she had recently seen! How she preferred that Italian lack of formality which at the same time never took liberty. The Scots resembled the Italians in their belief that neither work nor anything else could demean them. She must hope for a Scot—Above all, she must not weaken, and take a married couple. One was always a passenger, and in the event of trouble both would gang-up against the other servants. How thankful she was that she had never been burdened by either a coachman or a chauffeur. Again on Mr. Betterton-Best's advice, she had always hired from the nearest excellent firm.

But at present she was simply camping-out at the Villa, although her friends did not suspect this. Three nights a week an excellent freelance chef Maud Nevill came, cooked, and slept overnight—but could not be induced to remain longer. She was a morose, handsome, ladylike woman of

thirty, and Mrs. Betterton-Best feared was in the throes of an unsatisfactory love affair. At eight each morning Mrs. Ruddick, kitchen-hand, arrived and left at noon—on the nail. Jessie Stott, her peerless parlour-maid, now, alas, Jessie Muntz, arrived at ten each morning and remained till five. At four, except on Saturdays and Sundays, Emily Edge appeared, an elderly sewing-maid who washed-up and tidied around in a genteel way till nine. But from the start Emily had resolutely refused to shake the handle of the riddler, releasing the furnace ashes for Mrs. Ruddick at eight next morning. Plumbing, Emily maintained, had always been beyond her—she might upset the boiler.

And once a week, as in Marco's time, two men arrived from Maple's—characters out of Dickens: Wilbur Phipps, who polished the floors and tended the furniture; and Albert Church, who cleaned the silver and saw to the clocks. They were as quiet and efficient as a couple of saintly deaf-mutes. They always referred to Maple as the Firm. No other appeared to exist, and Mrs. Betterton-Best had now come to correlate it with heaven. Marco had also approved of Phipps and Church: 'The English at their best cannot be beaten, but—'

She was now left at the mercy of Marco's unfinished sentence. She lunched in town each day, dined out three times weekly, and saw that Maud Nevill left something cold for Sunday supper. But already she was worn out with the constant verbal intercourse needed to keep her retainers functioning. Mrs. Ruddick seemed unable to exist an hour without invoking advice or moral strength, and Mrs. Betterton-Best could now feel her own aspirates lapsing with Mrs. Ruddick's. Mercifully Miss Nevill was taciturn. Once only had she made a personal remark: 'Please don't thank me for waiting overnight—I quite enjoy your vicinity. You're so incredibly normal.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best had been a little startled by this tribute. Late that night when alone, she had addressed space as she sometimes did on unusual occasions: 'Charles, did you hear that—incredibly normal?' But this was no form of spiritualistic communion. It resembled a cable dispatched abroad, to some unknown address—and from which she expected no reply.

If any of these women suspected that now she sometimes spent certain nights alone in the Villa, they never had the temerity to mention this. That, like her nervousness, was her own concern, and she saw it through as a matter of course. A much greater misfortune would have been the premature admission to the Villa of one who might have proved a danger to its treasures. All those ex-service men now free—but the warning of Weston, the window-cleaner, acted as a brake. Her hair still rose when she remembered Weston. A man belonging to a reputable firm, who had blamelessly cleaned the Villa's windows for a year, until that dreadful morning recently when he had secretly nipped into the gallery, opened the glass case of her unique miniature collection, and released that appalling burglar-alarm. Installed at vast expense, it had justified itself by alarming the whole district. By the time that Weston, empty-handed, had regained his corridor window-sill, police cars were entering the park—no, the drive itself! Later Weston had been released with a caution. And afterwards the inspector had declared that the man was probably a tout who would now spread the news that the Villa should be written-off as a menace. This had certainly comforted her. But she had been shaken. Weston had attempted nothing like this in Marco's time—

And she had foolishly told Hugh Sondes about the experience. He had agreed with the inspector's verdict, but had added: 'I hope your new butler is arriving soon? You must never, of course, remain in the Villa alone at night.' And for once his pale blue eyes had looked quite beady as he made this point.

'Let us hope,' she said piously, 'that I shall never have to!' already regretting these confidences. Fortunately Hugh had always believed her to be too feminine for words—he would never credit that she could.

Lord Brompton's butler this week had been her biggest disappointment. At the registry office he had seemed as suitable as anyone who was not Marco could be. He had actually agreed to stoke once nightly if the hods were filled for him, and if someone else could be guaranteed to clean the boiler-furnace weekly. Mrs. Betterton-Best, who knew still less of the needs of her own boiler than did Lord Brompton's butler, said weekly

cleaning would be arranged. The butler, much cheered also by the news that her silver was cleaned weekly by someone other than himself, and that she also entertained very little nowadays at home, had permitted himself to be regarded as a certainty. Then, and then only, was he allowed to visit his future address.

Within five minutes at the Villa the blow had fallen—as soon as the butler saw Marco's ideal suite of bedroom, bathroom, office-sitting-room, on the ground floor. It would not do at all, he said—almost trembling as he spoke. Never had he been able to find his sleep—as he put it—on the ground floor. It brought on his summer asthma. He had to sleep high.

Mrs. Betterton-Best had given him one flashing look, then, smiling briefly, had terminated the interview with a speed that astonished that excellent servant. 'Winter asthma would be worse,' she assured him. She could scarcely get him out of the house quickly enough.

In the case of burglars this creature would have been an added liability—she would have had to protect him also. A six-footer too—she simply did not know what the world was coming to . . . for, as her friends suspected, Mrs. Betterton-Best was one of those unmaternal women who demand elementary courage in a man as the first essential of his state. A man devoid of this was as much use to her in an emergency as a life-boat with a leak, or, for daily use, a chair with a weak leg. Despite her passion for the late Mr. Betterton-Best, it is perhaps a lamentable fact that had he ever shown the slightest lack of courage, she would have finished with him as a partner on the spot.

This morning, by the time she had begun her second cup of tea, being optimistically rather than mathematically inclined, she was assuring herself that by the law of averages there must be at least six suitable butlers somewhere in the British Isles who would jump at this post—if only they knew of it.

Last night she had again slept alone in the house, and it was beginning to get her down—or rather up . . . for three times she had awakened wondering if she'd heard something. It was absurd. But this morning she felt on top of the world, as Miss Nevill was arriving to cook, and sleep tonight.

Hugh Sondes was due for dinner at eight. She had not dared postpone this much longer—for Hugh as her best friend must

not be allowed to suspect the nakedness of the land. Such a blessing that her best friend was a man! Any woman would now sense the servant situation as soon as she sat down—and let her antennae range. Jessie Muntz had agreed to wait at table, although this meant remaining until nine at least. Hugh would suspect nothing. Meantime the sun shone—all would be well!

At that moment Mrs. Ruddick knocked twice on the door of the morning-room—

Mrs. Betterton-Best winced—she could not make Mrs. Ruddick realize that no one knocked on living-room doors.

As she did not answer, Mrs. Ruddick knocked a third time—quite loudly. The sound reminded Mrs. Betterton-Best of the *trois-coups* of the French theatre—pregnant with drama.

This time Mrs. Ruddick entered. 'Oh, ma'am,' she said, 'I'm sorry to disturb, but I'm almost demented! The boiler's done me down again. I won't be able to keep going. It's playing on me nerves. Me husband says it's got to stop. He's always been against the Villa, with us living at Earl's Court. He says I've got to tell you today, ma'am, that this is a week's notice starting Monday. After all your kindness, I'm sure I'm properly ashamed'—she burst into tears.

'Sit down, Mrs. Ruddick,' her mistress said calmly. 'What's the matter with the furnace—er, boiler, today?'

'Well, ma'am, I'm not saying Mrs. Muntz isn't giving it a good shake before she leaves at five, but it's a crying sin that Miss Edge won't touch it when she leaves at nine. The clogging is something cruel by the time I reaches it next morning. You've got to sleep overnight with a boiler like that to master it properly. It's got to be a regular nightmare with me that one morning I'll find it *out*. And if I did, Ma'am, I could do nothink. No, I couldn't. As it is, I can't get it drawing properly before ten—you must have noticed it your-self, the hot water isn't what it was. Well, ma'am, the flues is responsible for that, and I don't even know where they are, for I'm frightened to let the boiler out. They haven't been cleaned since Mr. Marco died, and he was always most particular to clean them every week. He always said it wasn't everybody's boiler. We used to laugh at him when he said it needed understanding as well as handling. He said it was a bit of a woman and a bit of a horse—

a regular Sphinx, he called it, ma'am, like that animile on your roof.'

'Good heavens!' Mrs. Betterton-Best smiled, 'the answer to the ancient riddle of the Sphinx *was* a man—and it looks as if the answer is the same today. Don't give it another thought. Just do your best with it until you leave a week on Monday. And at a later date, when a new butler is installed here, Mr. Ruddick may perhaps allow you to return.'

'Oh, ma'am, you 'ave took this well! It's a butler you need. Someone like Mr. Marco. Any 'ouse as big as the Villa needs a man to steady it. But I'll do my best with the boiler till a week on Monday—I won't see you stuck till then.'

'Splendid,' Mrs. Betterton-Best affirmed, and then had one of her inspirations. Maple had never failed her yet. She would get Maple to come and clean the flues. Aloud she said: 'Tomorrow you may let the furnace out. I hope to have a man to clean it before noon.'

She left Mrs. Ruddick to the breakfast dishes, and telephoned Maple about the boiler's condition. Maple seemed surprised, but not dismayed—and after reading the letters sent by various registry offices, she also telephoned the most promising of that number, where less happily, a certain scepticism still prevailed. Two possible men would be held for three and three-thirty that afternoon—both elderly, and one objected to stairs. . . .

Rather than go through this boiler business again, Mrs. Betterton-Best decided, I will take lessons from Maple's expert and manage the thing myself. But it has not come to that yet. No. Nor shall Mrs. Ruddick's husband run my house from Earl's Court. Why, had I only known, I would have gone down each night and shaken the wretched riddler myself—

Until now she had resolutely refused to have one of those new gas run boilers. That would mean alterations to the fabric of the Villa itself, and this she could not bear to contemplate. The very thought of the upheaval made her shudder. Every floor would have to come up to permit something called a gas-intake. The house had always been efficiently heated by hot-air channels and gratings tirelessly supplied by her herculean boiler which had never (until Marco's death) given her a moment's anxiety. Then, too, gas would at once unsettle her

Insurance Agent. He would come sniffing round any installation of gas in her cellar, shaking his head over the possibility of explosion and assuring her that apart from this ultimate calamity she was now a fire hazard of a much more serious sort. And up would go her already heavy premiums, for Mrs. Betterton-Best's treasures were, in many cases, much more valuable than her friends suspected. On the other hand, the Gas Company, in its soothing way, had assured her that after their attentions her house would be labour-free and as clean as a whistle. It would all be over in four or five weeks—say six to allow for snags. *Snags*. It was this unexplored possibility of snags that Mrs. Betterton-Best found herself quite unable to face. No, the house must recover from Marco's death before sustaining a major operation like this. And it would take at least a year to recover. Besides . . . one major operation sometimes led to another—Just recently she had had fleeting glimpses of what some morbid souls meant when they said it would be simpler to die.

It was such a happy house too. Visitors often remarked on this during their brief but pleasant glimpses. Nearly all showed a disposition to linger—that had been one of the problems the Villa entailed. One distinguished professor on entering her drawing-room had actually exclaimed: 'Now I realize that all my life I have dwelt in squalor.' He too had ended by proposing. What they all wanted, of course, was the Villa. Except Hugh, who was inclined to be critical of its size—

Mrs. Betterton-Best opened the door of the room to the right of the gallery, and which shared its north aspect. No visitors were allowed to enter this room, nor did they know what it contained. Hugh used to refer to it with tender irony as Blue-Beard's Chamber—until a month ago when he had discovered one of her water-colours exhibited in the Falaise Gallery, St. James's. Quite acidly he had said: 'Admirable—why do you waste your time doing anything else?' Apparently he thought she knocked off a study like *Kew Bridge, Evening* as a whim. It had taken her a lifetime to achieve that standard—although on rare occasions she had had pictures exhibited before. She never sent one in unless she felt dead-certain . . . and always under her unknown maiden name: Rhoda Mead. Maddening that he should have recognized her as that—

Entering her studio, now she felt the same mingling of pang and pleasure that it always gave her. Providence—for thus she apostrophized God in her few mordant moments—had seen fit to dispense with genius in her case, and despite every effort in this field, she remained frustrated. Her commodious studio amounted to her consolation prize. That was all she could say for it, although she had long now been reconciled to her lack of the vital gift. Yes, and enjoyed 'life more fully because she had ceased to hanker after the unattainable! The odd thing was that *Kew Bridge, Evening* had been less effort than usual . . . but that canvas on the easel was giving her trouble—

There was a knock on this door too—of all doors . . . these servants were now beyond a joke—

Jessie—to say Mr. Hugh Sondes was on the telephone! She had put him through to the library opposite—

Mrs. Betterton-Best brightened. Perhaps Hugh was going to cancel dinner tonight . . . But, alas, no—it was simply to say he much regretted he would be quarter of an hour late, and hoped she would forgive him.

'But, of course,' she crooned, and longed to add: but Jessie won't, nor her honeymoon-husband, confound you!

As she hung up the receiver, she decided on the temperate greenhouse . . . But the head gardener was there and garrulous about green-fly. It would be cooler outside—in the rose-garden. There the under gardener trundled up with a barrow. Since Marco's death he, like all her retainers, had become unendurably voluble. . . .

She crossed the long lawn, and through a bewitching little birch copse found one of her three small summer-houses silently awaiting her.

Unfortunately this was the summer-house on the extreme left of the Villa, and as she sat down, raising her eyes to the blessed emptiness of heaven, she saw the Sphinx on the east parapet contemplating heaven too. This at once evoked the boiler. ~

And as one discomfort gives rise to another, she now remembered that this was the summer-house in which Hugh had proposed in 1914, two years after the death of Charles. The two men had never met. She had known Mr. Sondes very slightly in those earlier days. It was in the past nine years that

their friendship had prospered. Even so, she had been widowed a year before Mr. Sondes found himself able to lift the large photograph of Mr. Betterton-Best from the mantelpiece, and say with just the right degree of detachment (and *à propos* of nothing at all): 'You know—your husband reminds me of someone, and I can't think who—?' It was the more candid study of Mr. Betterton-Best amid the sub-tropical palms of Biarritz, and minus the sun-helmet of the South American portrait.

Mrs. Betterton-Best had taken the photograph from Mr. Sondes, had gazed at it reverently, as she said softly: 'Ah, had you seen him yourself, you would have known that there was none like him.' After the right interval, she had replaced the photograph, and offered Mr. Sondes another dry sherry. Mr. Sondes had realized the fruitlessness of his speculations. Through the Jebbs at whose home they had first met, he must long ago have known that hers had been an ideal marriage. Despite Mr. Betterton-Best's prolonged absences abroad, as his South-American business interests compelled—the select number of friends and acquaintances who caught a glimpse of their domestic felicity, when they shared a sundowner with Charles, could testify that after ten years they were still as much in love as ever . . . that this possibly explained why such a delightful couple entertained so little on his return home. Playfully Mrs. Betterton-Best would bemoan after a departure—'I declare I'm almost as badly off as a sailor's wife!' But it seemed a singularly happy union. And a number of her woman friends frankly envied her—matrons among them. All this Mr. Sondes knew very well. He had let another year elapse—and then he had proposed marriage.

It came as a most unpleasant shock. Their friendship, quiet, calm, constant, imposing no personal obligation was just what she needed. In its way, it was ideal. She had already gone her limit—

She told Hugh the truth. She never quite knew why. At the time she decided it must be because he deserved something, when she had, of course, to refuse him. But she had certainly favoured no other suitor with the truth. Perhaps, too, the fact that war had just broken out had unnerved her. At any rate, seated in this summerhouse with him that August evening she had told him of Charles's identity.

At the time he had protested vigorously that all this was no reason why she should continue to commit suttee. And it had taken her almost another hour to convince him that she was a one-man woman. By that time it had grown dark. Their voices had begun to rise, and in her fear that she had seriously jeopardized her inner security by her confession—she had possibly been a trifle blunter on the subject of marriage than was perhaps quite kind. But luckily Hugh had taken her refusal after that as a matter of course. It was true that he had finally left her that night angrily, but when next they met—the whole episode might never have happened. This was an enormous relief.

Once a week she still dined with Hugh. Quite often they went to a concert or a theatre later. Strangers at these assemblies often concluded they were man and wife. But their friends and acquaintances knew better—much too selfish, both of them. Another evening they might meet at the Pentlands or the Jebbs. And her days, like her evenings, were as pleasantly full. She still painted in fierce fits and starts. She visited every exhibition of painting in London, and travelled to others. At least three or four times monthly she attended lectures on this or that at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Although Hugh Sondes knew most of her movements, she never mentioned these to him. The Victoria and Albert might have been an illicit passion. Intellectually Hugh was unusually able, and although he never paraded it, he was invested with a superiority that left this student on another plane. Charles's superiority she had adored—but Hugh's, certainly not. So she continued to lead her double-life in secret, and occasionally to astonish Hugh with esoteric bits of information about the Ancient Sumerians, and Anglo-Saxon ship-burial at Sutton Hoo. Or she would proffer in her sunny way a likelier date for a Delft dish seen in Bond Street. Gallantly Hugh would accept correction, and would sometimes invite more, his blue eyes expressionless.

But Rhoda took care. Mrs. Betterton-Best had never liked her name. It belonged to someone like Hugh's sister Millicent—brought up on a hockey stick, and with as much dress sense as a clothes-horse.

Happily Hugh had few relations. The only vital one was

Millicent, who mercifully lived at Marlborough—a lanky edition of Hugh, but totally devoid of his elegance and charm . . . a spinster terse of speech, alert of eye who had no use for Rhoda once she discovered that this frivolous creature did not mean to submerge in the Sondes family. Matrimonially the Sondes existed only to reproduce themselves. Their wives went for nothing. Rhoda had seen photographs of Hugh's father, and found Hugh with a fierce moustache confronting her. She had gazed on photogravures of Hugh's grandfather to be faced by Hugh in side-whiskers, and finally Hugh from his great grandfather's portrait had looked down upon her with an air of reproof and an imperial. She had not the slightest doubt that the world was the better for this universal emphasis on Sondes—but had she married Hugh and been blessed with a daughter, she knew quite well that she would simply have been saddled with another Millicent, and the thought was too fearsome for words.

No, no, no, now that Charles was gone, her heart was back where it belonged. And there she meant it to remain. Safe and sound.

Of course, as a perfectionist herself, she greatly admired Hugh's undeniable elegance of mind and habit, a correctitude that was a grace—and failed to understand why these sometimes ruffled her. His chambers in Albany; his work at the Foreign Office, from which he had recently retired only to assume advisory importance on the staff of a notable weekly; his committee connexions with this university and that hospital—and those affiliations at home and abroad into which he had been born, and retained without effort . . . above all, that habitual lightness of touch in weighty or worldly matters which rivalled her own—

Was it this, she now wondered, that she envied in him, for his touch was traditional, while hers had been acquired, of necessity, upon her tight-rope?

But she had a genuine sympathy for a difficulty he concealed, and which possibly she alone suspected. He was always remarkably well turned-out, but she had an idea that his means were adequate rather than comfortable. Certain things had also endeared him to her—he had chosen that silly photograph of her as a girl, when a simper was fashionable and considered

sweet. Then, too, his patience with his sister was beyond praise, for Millicent had been a militant suffragette who courted arrest, although the London police had fallen over themselves to avoid tackling her. When she was finally detected with chemical intent at the very mouth of a pillar-box, they had simply hustled her back like a troublesome mastiff. Rhoda, appalled, predicted: 'If she's not careful, she'll end in prison.'

'Quite possible,' Hugh had agreed. He seemed amused rather than amazed by Millicent's preposterous treatment of pillar-boxes. And just for a moment then, Rhoda had wondered if she did understand Hugh after all—and his correctitude. At the same time there was something essentially nice about him—

Seated in the summer-house now, she acknowledged this again. She was devoted to him, and would be delighted to welcome him to dinner tonight. It was simply that the Sphinx—the boiler had got her down for a moment . . . ridiculous really on this perfect day in May.

9. Mrs. Betterton-Best's Storm, evening

Mr. Sondes, unfortunately, arrived early instead of late for dinner.

Emily Edge, retired seamstress, had let him in.

Mr. Hugh Sondes was her favourite gentleman. When he smiled his rare, sweet smile, as he did now, Emily was lost to all but the need of furnishing him with all the friendly chat she could. So gently did he hand her his hat, so slowly did she take it that a great deal could be said in these precious moments.

Madam was in the garden, sir, having a breath of fresh air—that nasty registry office all afternoon. Oh, Mr. Marco was a great miss—

'Indeed, yes,' Mr. Sondes continued to look at Emily with compelling sadness. Emily knew it made him happy to hear anything about Madam—even the bad news—and Emily yearned to oblige. Everyone knew he'd been in love with Madam for years—left hanging on a piece of string, when anyone else could see that Madam was the icing on the wedding-cake . . . not for afters. But gentlemen were always taken in.

'Mr. Marco won't be easy to replace, sir. We all has our little ways, but at least he was a worker. And today, sir, such a shock it's been—Mrs. Ruddick has given notice. The boiler 'as broke her up—'

'The boiler?' Mr. Sondes was astonished. 'Has there been an accident?'

'No, sir—it's just wore her out . . . it needs a man.' Emily dropped her voice, 'And now Madam has given orders that tonight the boiler is to be allowed to go out, *because—*'

They both looked up.

Jessie Muntz, née Stott, the peerless parlour-maid stood there, forbidding in her uniform. Emily, abashed, scuttled.

'Good evening, Jessie,' Mr. Sondes said pleasantly. 'I understand that Madam is in the garden.'

'Good evening, sir,' Jessie said stonily, as he strolled towards the terrace.

Admirable creature, he thought—still here on her honeymoon! Rhoda is of course a witch—but a boiler is scarcely a broomstick. Why has it to go out tonight?

He crossed onto the terrace outside the smaller drawing-room, which he much preferred to the regal salon upstairs. That earlier thunder shower had already dried, but the air was delightfully fresh.

He stood looking across the lawn which like a broad green river swept in pleasant curves between banks of azalea, headlands of Chinese prunus and Japanese maple. May's heatwave had hastened the herbaceous borders too, and at vista's end the giant wheel of the distant rose-garden was already rotating in colour. He stepped forward to the wrought-iron rail between the urns to escape the sweetness of the myrtle, and here the sun-warm scent of box restored him, summer's own! The day's oppression had become a fragrant intoxication here. The garden lay now in the settled light of a golden evening, an island of calm. He could hear a pigeon drooling away in sleepy content, the splash of a blackbird diving through laurel leaves, a late bee bumbling home. It was an English garden at its leisured best. London was no more than a sultry thrumming in the distance.

Rhoda certainly deserved credit for the perfection of this sanctuary, but he had an idea that here too the end was in sight. The merry month of May would not last indefinitely—

He caught sight of her now, moving through the rose-garden. She had not seen him yet, but she was on her way back to the house—to meet him at the time he had appointed. Frivolous she might be, punctilious she undoubtedly remained. She was wearing that oyster-coloured ninon that he liked, slim lines

with a yoke of artless simplicity, although he had a shrewd idea as to its cost.

Half-way across the lawn, she looked up, saw him, waved and slightly quickened her graceful pace. She added a final touch of loveliness to the scene. And when she drew nearer, she would scarcely look more than thirty years or so. It was all just a little too good to be true—

At times she bored him to exasperation—despite her beauty. Yet he continued to hover around. Habit, he supposed . . . lord, his self-deception was worse than hers! She had other traits that he found wholly pleasing—and he knew it. Silent beside him in the theatre, when she was not in one of her soulful or informative moods; or driving gaily into the country . . . her frank enjoyment of food, her unexpected flashes of humour. She was eminently companionable when she forgot to coo. Sometimes he wondered if a blazing row would not have saved their situation. Instead he had left her behind her perpetual yasmak. That damned man had spoiled her beyond belief—although, of course, the situation must have had its difficulties for her. Sondes had been given the facts, but no details. In some respects she was still an unresolved riddle—but then what man on earth has ever known the far side of the moon?

Calmly he went down the steps to greet her. 'The first time that I have drawn breath today!'

'The park is wonderful, isn't it?' she smiled. 'We might be a hundred miles from London.'

'No, your garden is wonderful—the heart of London, *and* unbelievably cool—'

On this amicable note they went in to dinner.

Somewhat to Sondes's surprise the dinner was a hot one—He was not to know that the next time he elected to come Maud Nevill might not be available, but his hostess knew this. Aspics from Fortnum and Mason must be held in reserve. 'Tonight Chicken Maryland followed a hot consommé with a piping climax of cheese soufflé. If Sondes was dismayed that he had not been regaled with jellied soup, lobster mayonnaise, or a water-ice, he did not show it—and indeed the meal was excellent, if torrid. Mercifully the Liebfraumilch was the right temperature for a heatwave.

They had coffee below the terrace, in the camellia arbour

because Rhoda was determined that he should hear the nightingale. 'I know you don't believe there is one here, Hugh, but surely tonight it will justify me.'

'Well, I've certainly waited nine summers to hear it.'

'Is it as long as that? Last night it was an enchantment. At one point I thought it would go mad with joy. Perhaps it's your lack of faith that keeps it quiet.'

'More than likely. By the way where are you going on holiday this summer?'

'I haven't decided yet. Scandinavia for you, I expect?'

'I've not decided either. But I advise you to give Italy a wide berth. That fellow Benito Mussolini is busy again. His complete cynicism seems to have hypnotized the entire nation. First he tries to sell himself to the trades-union leaders, then when the strikers are worsted, offers his gang's services to the employers and bankers. This, too, after his open aid to d'Annunzio! Next the Liberal Government takes him to its arms . . . and now they're suspicious—and so am I—that he may again negotiate with the Socialists. So don't attempt an Italian visit this year. I've reason to believe that some such pact may shortly be signed. If so, the employers will be up in arms, and the Fascists themselves uneasy—'

'Rest assured! I may just stay quietly here for once. The garden will be at its best. And I'm so comfortable at the Villa.'

'You are?' he glanced across at her.

Smiling, she bowed: 'I am—' then suddenly she leant forward, 'Listen! the nightingale—'

In the silence a melodious gurgling emerged from the thicket and then rippled forth in jubilation. But Sondes scarcely noticed it as he watched the woman before him—for once rapt beyond herself, her hand raised, her face rapturous, her whole body turned in ardent grace towards the invisible bird. Such beauty had been the inspiration of ancient Greece. For a moment he knew himself to be in the presence of a force as fugitive to mortals as it was eternal with truth.

His reaction was both swift and unsuitable—a longing to seize her in his arms at last. Civilization has its drawbacks, he decided.

Politely he remarked, 'It's growing cooler—shall I get a wrap for you?'

'Oh, thank you . . . yes,' she said absently. 'Miss Nevill will give it to you, if you ring the drawing-room bell—tell her I left it on my dressing-room chair.'

He walked quickly into the house. He did not ring the drawing-room bell. He went swiftly upstairs, in the direction of the door he believed belonged to her dressing-room. His behaviour was inexcusable, but he did not give a damn. He was looking for something other than the wrap—

He opened the dressing-room door, and stopped short. A full length oil portrait of Rhoda as a girl confronted him, with artless gaiety. He himself had a small photograph of this portrait which he had never seen before, but which he had always called his Edwardian springtime.

Frowning, he picked up the white cashmere wrap for he suddenly knew himself to be in the dressing-room that had once belonged to Mr. Betterton-Best.

Abruptly he opened the door into the wide, south bedroom with its flowering balcony, and delicately ruffled curtains. It held all the sleepy scents of a summer's day idly departing. On the white bed, prepared for slumber, her lawn nightgown lay in an ice-blue cloud. Two rose-coloured mules pointed towards him from the hem of this garment—once more he had everything but the woman.

On the mantelpiece was a duplicate of the photograph that stood in the drawing-room—Mr. Betterton-Best in his sun-helmet. On the toilet table was that other of Mr. Betterton-Best, somewhat obscured by the palms and cactus of Biarritz.

The intruder turned away. He had seen what he was looking for . . . But on leaving, he noticed with surprise on the bedside table, beside a small Fabergé clock, a worn old Bible. It was the only shabby object in this luxurious room, and the sight of it disconcerted him.

He walked brusquely into the dressing-room—on his way out . . . and again stopped short. Facing him now was the wall he had not seen when he first entered—

On it was a remarkable oil-painting of a middle-aged man in a travelling-cape—Mr. Betterton-Best no longer shadowed by sun-helmet or sub-tropical vegetation. The features were superb, the eyes enigmatic, the smile benevolent—any observer was in the presence of a sovereign personality. . . .

Yet as the unworthy guest went downstairs, he did not feel guilty but incensed. By the time he had reached the garden and his hostess, he had come to a decision. He had stood enough—

Amiably he said: 'I did not see Miss Nevill, so I found the wrap myself—'

Her hand outstretched for it stiffened, and her smile too. Lightly he placed it on her shoulders, and said reminiscently:

'Indoors one misses Marco.'

'One does indeed,' she retorted shortly, but was not to be drawn beyond that. 'Thank you for bringing the scarf. I think, all the same, that we'll go into the drawing-room now. The nightingale has gone—'

'Perhaps it followed me into the house?' he suggested.

'Quite likely,' she smiled politely. 'It has certainly grown colder.'

In the drawing-room she turned on the lights, and said pleasantly: 'Do smoke,' but he was not deceived, she was furious with him. This mortal had profaned the sanctuary. 'How beautiful they are the lordly ones, who dwell in the hills, in the hollow hills . . .' But she was also dwelling in 1921, and her anger suited him very well.

'What about our coffee cups in the garden?' he remarked, 'Shall I bring them in?'

'Nevill is doing that,' she said calmly, and glancing through the open window he saw the tall, dark woman crossing the lawn in the dusk. He lit his cigar.

'Your new cook is a find,' he remarked. 'I congratulate you. When does Lord Brompton's butler arrive?'

'He doesn't,' she said lightly, again regretting that she had mentioned the man before he was a certainty. 'As soon as he realized that he must sleep on the ground floor—in Marco's suite—he was alarmed. An unmarried man.'

'Poltroon double-dyed,' Sondes said blandly.

She settled herself more comfortably among her cushions. 'It always takes a little time to get the right man.'

'If you're looking for a second Marco—an eternity, I imagine.'

She gave a sweet little sigh of assent. 'Yes—none knows that

better than I do. But I am hoping to find a Scot—they always work well.'

Sondes's cigar was now drawing to perfection. 'The Scots are usually exemplary—but exacting.'

'Just what is needed here,' she agreed.

'And who,' Sondes inquired, 'is sleeping on your ground floor at present?'

'We ring the changes,' she smiled, and he did not press the point. She decided that the episode of the dressing-room was a momentary aberration. He had gone up as he might to Millicent's room. He was both restful and reliable. These were the potent reasons why they had dined together twice weekly for the past nine years. He knew when to come and when to go, and where to stop.

Cheerfully she said, 'I'm quite resigned to a second-best Marco.'

As genially Sondes replied, 'You won't find him—nor yet a third or fourth-rate Marco. The world has changed, Rhoda. You and I are a couple of anachronisms.'

She was astonished. 'In what way?'

Pleasantly he said, 'In every way. That's why we are here alone together. We have alienated many friends by sheer indifference—and no longer have the energy to make more. As one grows older, the social scene changes, empties . . . and then creature comforts—if available—assume still greater importance. These are essential if solitude is to become endurable. Such attractions as solitude affords are then secured by routine—and actually assume a ritual importance. We are dying as slowly and as comfortably as possible. But after a world war, revolution is the order of the day, and crisis discovers people like us embedded in an earlier security. That is why you have my condolences now.'

She laughed outright, and she had a very pretty laugh. 'But I am not in mourning, Hugh.'

'I realize that, Rhoda. You're still asleep on your feet. Egoists usually are.'

There was a small, volcanic silence. In the same soothing voice he continued, 'You haven't seen the writing on the wall yet. And that's understandable in this large, luxurious house—for it's generally inscribed on the cellar first.'

Coolly she said: 'You are in the drawing-room at present, Hugh. And when I think of Albany and its delightful glass arcade—its perpetual Saturday afternoon calm, I'm reminded that people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.'

'Albany,' he considered the ash of his cigar for a second, before knocking it off, 'where I have one presentable room and two cupboards.'

She glanced up quickly, liking him better for an instant, 'I didn't know you weren't happy there?'

'I am quite happy. I have the monastic attitude to cupboards. But between these and this Villa there is a considerable difference. And, of course, there is another difference between us—as companions in misfortune—' he paused.

'That is?' she said brightly.

'I *know* that I am a complete egoist: You do not even suspect yourself. Nothing has ever penetrated your veneer.'

But now she was smiling tolerantly—at last she knew where she was. Determined to keep the touch light she said:

'Would you prefer a Tottenham Court Road finish that showed every scratch?'

He did not answer, and she said more gently: 'Don't spoil our delightful Indian Summer, Hugh, with this asperity. It's much too warm indoors—' Younger than Hugh, she could afford to include herself in this pleasantry. But what on earth had happened to her perfect guest tonight?

'Our Indian Summer?' he repeated. 'I scarcely recognize us as Darby and Joan—'

Glancing up at him, unexpectedly, just then, she found him looking down at her with active dislike—and, for the first time, her heart lost a beat in a most unpleasant way.

Without a tremor, however, she made a reply that astonished him. Politely she said:

'What is the matter—how have I had the misfortune to offend you?'

More bluntly than he intended, he replied: 'No, I've always known the truth, seen this day coming. It's a forlorn hope to think you might now take my advice.'

'What is your advice?'

'Get rid of this house—'

She stared at him. Had he said: Take leave of your flesh and

bones, she could not have been more startled—nor indignant. Easily he continued: 'Move into an hotel—before it is too late.'

Too late! She who was well aware that she did not look a day more than thirty-five. 'My dear Hugh, I am barely forty, let alone sixty.'

'No,' he retorted surprisingly, 'but if you wish to reach sixty sane, it's what you'll have to do now—and people like you.'

This from a man ten years her senior, who looked every hour of his fifty years! *An hotel* . . . for reasons best known to herself, her blood ran cold at the very idea.

He was smiling now, as if amused by her amazement. Genially he quoted: '“And the Lord sent out a heavy storm so that the ship was like to be broken, but Jonah was fast asleep.” Had been for many years.'

Swiftly she countered: 'Am I being addressed by Jehovah or the Whale?'

'Work it out for yourself,' he said indulgently, as he rose to go. 'No—don't trouble to see me off . . . I know the way by this time.'

'That's no clue—so did the Whale!' she too was standing now.

Affably he kissed her hand, as he always did. 'My dear Rhoda, never—even during my period of infatuation—did I dream of swallowing you whole!'

The gibe from him, of all people, was so crude that for a second any answer failed her. Then she said with a control she was far from feeling: 'Hugh, I'm not going to let you spoil a delightful friendship in this way. I want to keep my pleasant memories of you at all costs. This means we cannot meet again. You yourself will realize that—or you would never have taken a sledge-hammer to crack a sugar almond.'

'Yes, Rhoda,' he agreed softly, 'our separation is inevitable. You will now embalm me also in an odour of sanctity—where I shall be much safer. There I will tranquilly await your summons back to life. *Au revoir*.'

'*Goodbye!*' for the first time her eyes flashed.

With his hand on the door, he said amiably: 'Dost thou well to be angry with the Gourd!'

'Flippancy,' she retorted, 'is an attitude—not an answer. You will always miss the miracle in life.'

'But I *am* the miracle,' he replied. 'I am the Gourd.'

Acidly she said, 'I do not recognize you.'

'Because you are asleep,' he repeated. 'And the sun has set—the Gourd is no longer needed. Goodnight—sweet dreams,' he shut the door between them . . .

And as he took the familiar walk from Regent's Park down Bond Street to Albany, he felt at peace with all men, and himself. Bond Street had an empty, moonlit intimacy at night—his footsteps echoed pleasantly through this stone corridor of early summer.

'I should have told her the truth years ago,' he reflected, and regardless of her reminder that people in glass houses should not throw stones, he turned calmly into his glass arcade. The beadle in his brown surcoat with scarlet lapels touched his gold-braided top hat smartly. Absently, Sondes responded, his attention engaged elsewhere. She will have to get out of that confounded house at last, he decided. Yes, the Villa's day is done—and a good thing too.

It was not until he reached the deep summer dusk of his own silent rooms that two irrelevant memories assailed him, for, absurdly enough, both seemed to imply that she was not as insensible after all—and some of his satisfaction rather treacherously oozed away . . . Her remark that he had taken a sledge-hammer to crack a sugar-almond—and the sight of that worn Bible by her bed.

10. Mrs. Betterton-Best's Storm, night

She stood motionless in the middle of the drawing-room until she heard, through the east window, Sondes's footsteps on the stone flags pass sedately out of earshot.

In her present ridiculous confusion, she was certain of one thing only—that Hugh had deliberately provoked this quarrel, and that made it more of a shock. He had wished an end—

Well, now he had it.

Quickly she went upstairs, and turned on the light by her bed. It was years since she had read the story of Jonah, and she was regrettably hazy about Jonah's exact relations with the Gourd.

Hastily she scanned the short, tense drama: 'And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceedingly glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered . . . And it came to pass when the sun did rise that God prepared a vehement east wind, and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah that he fainted and wished himself to die. . . . And God said to Jonah, Dost thou well to be angry. . . ?'

So this was how Hugh regarded himself—as the martyr of the story, *her* story! She who had brought nothing but charm and vivacity into his refined but somewhat arid existence . . . As for her grief—when had he, or anyone else for that matter,

as much as glimpsed this? Certain facts Hugh had been given in 1914, but it had been made abundantly plain to him that there had been enough joy in her past to furnish both present and future—

She closed the Bible, and walked to the balcony window with unseeing eyes.

And romance apart, she had always made the most of a full and enjoyable existence. This, Hugh knew quite well. His reference to himself as the Gourd was not even a compliment — Far from being sentimentally withered by his worm, he had just proved as active as an asp.

Frowning, she closed the curtains, for she too was mortally angry, but not with God, like Jonah. With the Gourd. . . .

An hour later, she opened the curtains again. Her bath had not refreshed her in the usual way. The night seemed to have become more oppressive—as if further thunder brooded. She felt limp—in need of air, and lay down on the balcony chaise-longue, drawing a light rug over her dressing-gown.

She could no longer conceal the truth. The worst moment of that astonishing quarrel had been when she surprised Hugh looking at her with active dislike. In his eyes there had also been a cool contempt. That had really shocked her, for she respected Hugh, as she respected anyone with a streak of the adamant in them—

What had she done to deserve that look? She could not for the life of her imagine. He had certainly been in a very strange state. Could he be ill? No, he had made an excellent dinner. But his remarks on the dangers of solitude had been almost fey, crowned by his reference to the writing on the wall of her cellar. His penetration in the matter of the boiler amounted to divination. Could Hugh have suddenly become clairvoyant? She had heard it said that some men like certain women passed through a morbid phase at mid-life.

The fact remained that he had clearly detected something in her that he disliked—yes, even despised. With the best will in the world, she could never feel the same to him again. That look had wrecked her confidence in him. There had been something detestable in it. She might have over-looked those insufferable things he had said—if he had later expressed regret, but that look had ended their friendship.

Instead of Hugh, her devoted friend and ardent admirer, her closest friend for nine years—she was left with Hugh's altered opinion of her, and a rancorous, unanswerable substitute it was going to be.

Suddenly, she flung the cushions from behind her head—and leant back on the hard end of the chaise-longue. It was too hot to be borne . . . and a fine sweat was rising on her brow and neck—

As this increased, she found herself invoking Charles in her own defence. Despite habitual benevolence, he was a man of lightning perception, infallible judgement—had she been as trivial, as unworthy as Hugh had implied, Charles would never have loved her so long and faithfully.

Never, never . . . but was it possible that she had altered since then? Could one change drastically without realizing this? No . . . deterioration must declare itself—it was common knowledge that one had to go forward, or back. One could not stand still—

Abruptly her heart lost a beat for the second time that night. Was it conceivable that Hugh was right—that she had fallen asleep on her own feet? Was she immured in this pleasant, healthy body that had rarely given her a day's anxiety?

Of course not—the neurotic notion was the direct result of his extraordinary attack. If one is knocked down, one has to get up—but this humiliating experience is certainly not a fall. Except from grace, on the part of one's assailant!

At the same time it might be true that she had lost a certain gregariousness—apart from her war-work. But there was an explanation for that. Throughout her life with Charles, she had been most careful to make no demands on friends or acquaintances. And, as a result, her popularity had steadily increased; her company was sought. But by then she had become accustomed to a marked degree of solitude, and could perceive some of its advantages. Few could make any demands on her—although she had her protégées, of course. . . .

But there was an element of danger there, and tonight she saw it. No, she was certainly not asleep. When one is dreaming there is no progress. Perhaps more progress in a nightmare, for then one awakens in alarm—

That hideous remark of Hugh's: 'Move into an hotel . . .' no

wonder her blood had run cold at the suggestion. An hotel, with elderly residents, as Aunt Ada had had to live, when she rescued her little niece . . . Those years that they had spent on the Riviera, in one frugal pension after another . . . To retire to an hotel, even though it be a suitably comfortable one was to go back to the beginning—to come full circle. And far too soon. She would sooner die! Why, the very thought was inducing the hysteria of a child—for prior to the Riviera had been Hammersmith—or Hades, from which Aunt Ada had saved her.

It was bringing back her earliest terror now—a certain alarm clock. . . .

In that drab, semi-detached house at Hammersmith, she had shared a bedroom with her mother, who lived in daily dread of losing her post as music-mistress at the Pembroke School for Young Ladies, by over-sleeping. To make assurance doubly sure Mrs. Mead, a determined character, went to bed with her alarm clock in a saucepan, and the din each day alerted Goods Station Road like a fire-brigade. Every morning Rhoda awoke screaming—

‘Such a strange child,’ her mother admitted to the charwoman, who obliged them every week. ‘No nerves by day, yet when asleep quite hysterical. Well, she’ll have to get used to it, for sometimes now I scarcely hear it myself.’

Mrs. Betterton-Best swung her feet quickly on to the balcony. Hugh’s hateful remark about an hotel had alarmed her as much as that clock in its saucepan. Ludicrously enough, she now felt chilled to the bone—she must go inside and get warm.

Her bedroom—as she had foolishly left a light on—proved to be a-smother with moths. This was certainly not her lucky day.

Sighing, she put the light out, and got into bed which received her with its soundless, enduring support, its resilient caress. Thank heaven for bed, and all it meant in effortless relaxation—

Already the moths were fluttering towards the starlit open window. She must turn her thoughts to happy things, for she did not feel in the least sleepy. A moth meant a love letter . . . Charles had written to her every day during any absence, and often cabled as well . . . His were the most beautiful love

letters she had ever read—and she had read many of history's famous love letters. But they were not a patch on Charles's. In fact the love letters of the famous had often embarrassed her with their baby endearments. If Charles had taken refuge in idiotic diminutives like that, she would have lost all interest. To do Hugh justice, she could not imagine him indulging in baby-talk either—

What on earth was she thinking of Hugh for—she wished to dwell on him as little as she did the boiler! Both were problems, but both had been dealt with. In the case of the boiler, Maple's men were arriving tomorrow. She must count her blessings. And Maud Nevill was sleeping at the other end of this corridor, so tonight she need not fall asleep with one ear on the alert. She had a perfect night in May before her—safe in her lovely and unique Villa. . . .

High on her pillows, she lay looking out from the soft, fragrant gloom of her room to the still depths of a midnight sky bemused with stars. How wonderful this was—she could drink it in for ever! It was helping her to recover from those nightmare words she had stumbled across as she read the Book of Jonah earlier tonight: 'And the floods compassed me about, all thy billows and thy waves passed over me . . . the waters compassed me about even to the soul: the depths closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottom of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever. . . .

Abruptly she sat upright in bed, the anguish of a certain remembrance again upon her, sweat this time breaking from her breast—

Intently she listened—but no longer heard the hollow roaring of the breakers on that desolate shore.

Instead, a soothing silence calmed, restored her—for in it she could detect the muted throb of London, the muffled but insistent pulse of a living heart. . . .

Part III

II. Edwardian Interlude, 1901-1912

As she relaxed again on her pillows, reassured, she reminded herself that it was, after all, safe to look back, if only she went far enough—for in the beginning, drab as it had been, she had been moving steadily towards Charles all the time.

Nothing so dynamic as their first meeting could belong to chance. It held all the finality of design. All perfection in life or art had the same curious familiarity—one recognized the ultimate.

Madame Melba had once declared in her hearing that the reign of King Edward had been an immense week-end party in which everyone was intent on getting the most out of life. And Mrs. Betterton-Bell had silently congratulated herself that in her own sedate and beautiful retreat she had improved on that vogue, by getting not the most but the best.

But she knew what Melba meant; and although there were many who did not benefit, yet an increasing number had been affected by the luxury of the new hotels, the animation of the theatres, and certainly neither before nor since had the shops of London attained such elegance and delight. Never had food and drink been so excellent. For a surprisingly small sum, too, Jack as well as his master could revel in London. Twilight for him and his Jill then had been a leisurely prelude to the enchantment of the pleasure gardens of Earl's Court and the White City. . . .

If one's childhood had been spent in Goods Station Road,

Hammersmith, one had a sounder idea than some critics of what that gaiety and glamour meant. King Edward had actually ended by brightening his own state funeral. At this there had been much less crape in evidence. Shop-windows had ornamented his photograph with purple bows and the effect had been almost gala. Any man who consistently cheered existence to this extent, surely deserved gratitude—

Tonight she realized for the first time that she had never accepted Goods Station Road as most children accept their environment. It had constantly dejected her. Yet she knew of nothing better, for her recollection of that choicer address before her father's death was too hazy for comparison. Later she was to learn that Hereward Mead had been a finer musician than her mother, but of less respectable stock. The Fanshaws were nothing if not refined! From the position of first violin in a notable London orchestra, her Irish father had rapidly declined to that of stop-gap in any second-rate show that would employ him. By nature convivial, he could never refuse a drink or a loan, and ended by soliciting both with disastrous results for his wife. He had been dead two years before Mrs. Mead could sincerely mourn him. During her husband's drinking-bouts she was often to think enviously of her sister Ada, living genially and in comparative affluence on the Riviera, where climate and the exchange were all that could be desired—a wise virgin, if ever there was one.

And then Mrs. Mead would catch sight of Rhoda, placidly supping bread and milk, and that bland baby face would go to her heart. She would draw the little girl into her arms, and kiss her tenderly. And Rhoda who already had a hearty appetite for love and admiration would become blander than ever. From her earliest years she was well aware that she afforded much satisfaction.

But as an only child she spent too much time mooning out of the window, and what she saw in Goods Station Road depressed her unutterably. Their dingy little house was the survivor in a row already demolished. A towering hoarding had sealed off the site of these razed foundations, which had meantime become a scrap-heap, adjoining the marshalling-yard itself. This hoarding held bills advertising Pears Soap, Mellins' Food, BLOATER PASTE and various Pickles. Opposite was a

row of warehouses, with brewery and bottling depots, and a coal-merchant's offices. On the other side of their house was a newspaper shop which stocked cigarettes, confectionery, and mineral-waters; and the entrance to a Baptist Tabernacle. At all hours of the day and night Number Nine was assailed by the noise of warning whistles, violent collisions, and the ster-torous ejection of steam.

Up and down this road passed drays, lorries and vans, but few pedestrians to enliven Rhoda. At this window tediums of time passed over her which later she was never to forget. Mrs. Mead, who had not seen her sister since her marriage had once boasted by letter that she had rented this house for a song. This flourish was necessary as Ada had always considered her a poor manager. But Mrs. Mead had not mentioned what a dreary song the house sang.

During any fine week-end, Mrs. Mead would take Rhoda to the park, or Kew Gardens. 'Why can't we live there?' the child asked. 'By and by, perhaps,' Mrs. Mead said. But when nothing came of those promises, and Rhoda persisted, Mrs. Mead declared: 'Rhoda, you are six. No child of your age has the right to criticize her home like this. It is impudent and ungrateful.' And Mrs. Mead who was a somewhat inexperienced mother added truthfully: 'I'm surprised at you.'

'But,' Rhoda insisted—

'Stop it!' commanded Mrs. Mead who was, nevertheless, learning.

Pupils sometimes gave Mrs. Mead tickets for the pantomime, and the theatre proved to be Rhoda's first intoxication. Next day she made a little theatre of her own from a cardboard box. Her whole life brightened. She cut out figures from a magazine and pasted them on cardboard. Each cardboard effigy she then split to the knees, and by bending one leg forward and the other back achieved a standing posture. For her transformation scene she had an arch of roses cut from a Christmas card, sparkling with tinsel, and already satisfactorily stiffened.

Mrs. Mead was astonished. I must really send her to school soon, she decided in her worried way. . . .

Four years later Rhoda was considered the brightest pupil at the Pembroke School for Young Ladies.

From time to time Aunt Ada sent Rhoda postcards or small reproductions of famous Italian works of art. At a period when many children are fed on sentimental travesties of art, Rhoda came under this creative influence. Busily she copied these pictures. Sometimes a replica was sent to Aunt Ada at Florence or San Remo. Aunt Ada too became interested in Rhoda. . . .

Rhoda was fourteen when Mrs. Mead died of that bronchitis which she had so often weathered before. Rhoda was beyond grief, and the Hammersmith doctor who looked upon her as a stoic, thought it advisable to warn her that her aunt, Miss Fanshawe, might not see her way to come—

But Aunt Ada came at once—and was privately horrified by Goods Station Road. Any resentment that she felt at the sacrifice that Rhoda's support must now entail, dissipated at her first glance at this quite terrible environment—for as such she saw it. She felt only a compassionate urge to get that dear child safely away to the sunshine and beauty of Italy. . . .

At first Rhoda was as stunned by this beauty as she had earlier been by grief. But shortly with the resilience of youth and the sound food of the San Remo hotel, she was blooming visibly.

Daily Aunt Ada's friend Miss Glossop, who had an *appartement* in the centre of San Remo, gave her lessons in French, Italian and painting.

Miss Glossop was a short plump girlish woman of fifty, who favoured violet colours, coquettish hats and a pearl *collier*. At all times she wore an alarming amount of rouge, but a great deal was excused Miss Glossop for her family connexions were distinguished. Aunt Ada, whose modest neckbands were boned to the ears, and whose sole ornament was a chatelaine with a gold pencil, tucked inside an austere waist-band, had exercised a restraining influence on Miss Glossop for years—yet somehow Miss Glossop managed to remain festive. Sur-reptitiously she had indulged Rhoda from the start.

At eighteen Rhoda, chaperoned by Miss Fanshawe or Miss Glossop, for this was 1898 in Italy, passed pleasant busy little days—and was still forbidden to read *Jane Eyre*. Miss Glossop who thought this prohibition absurd, privately presented Rhoda with one of Rita's novels. In bed at night Rhoda

entered an exotic world hitherto unimagined. Eagerly she read on—until half-way she came to a paragraph at which she almost swooned. At an exclusive dinner-party an elderly roué suddenly declared that he wore blue satin corsets with rosebud trimming! Rhoda dropped the book on the floor. That any man should wear *corsets*, and boast of rosebud trimming—she shuddered under the bed-clothes, and felt that she herself would never be the same again. The very knowledge of this depravity placed her in its blue satin proximity. This was wickedness at its most frightful. No wonder Aunt Ada was nervous of literature. . . .

At twenty-one there was little change in Rhoda's outlook but much in her attractive person. Repeatedly Miss Fanshawe steeled herself with the reminder that soon now Rhoda would marry and leave her. Apprehensively Miss Fanshawe awaited this unwelcome suitor, and prayed that he would be rich as well as virtuous. Nor, of course, must he be too belated. Worse still was it for Miss Fanshawe to contemplate the possibility of her own death before Rhoda married happily. With the expiry of Miss Fanshawe's annuity, the poor child would be forced to earn her living by teaching. Rhoda was intelligent, and already spoke French and Italian fluently, but Miss Fanshawe felt that her impatient temperament was against success in Miss Glossop's profession. No, Rhoda must marry—grievous though it was to envisage separation.

So far Rhoda had shown little interest in the opposite sex as such, nor, Miss Fanshawe was forced to realize, had young men eligible, or otherwise, paid much attention to Rhoda.

What Miss Fanshawe failed to recognize, but Miss Glossop had readily perceived, was that nature had subdued Rhoda's glamorous appearance by cool grey eyes and an impish sense of fun. Rhoda's figure was exquisite, and her lovely mouth had a singularly sweet smile, but when those same lips were compressed and the dreamy eyes alert, self-important young men had not failed to notice that an endurance test had begun that might prove strenuous. Yet at other times, as Miss Glossop knew, a wild rose flush would tinge her cheek, and her pale, suave face hold a hint of Galatea.

Once a year the three of them visited Florence together. It was the only extravagance that Miss Fanshawe permitted.

There, Miss Glossop was hospitably housed by her important cousins, and Miss Fanshawe, with Rhoda, put up at her old and excellent hotel—renewing the acquaintance of their more impressive friends.

Florence was always highly satisfactory—until 1901, when Rhoda at the age of twenty-one fell fatally in love there. And with such scandalous speed, such a shameless and unsuitable thoroughness that Miss Fanshawe had never heard its like. Worse still, she had known nothing at all about it at first! Nor had Miss Glossop. Each had been allowed to think that Rhoda was with the other. Overnight Rhoda became adult—in duplicity at least.

Yet innocently enough at first, Rhoda had discovered Miss Glossop in bed with a chill, at her cousin's house—full of regret that she could not accompany her to the gallery nearby for their morning's work.

Rhoda had reassured her—she was already well known at the gallery, and probably Aunt Ada would join her there tomorrow to see how the picture was progressing. 'I don't want to lose a single hour,' Rhoda added. And then Miss Glossop had uttered those significant words: 'Tell Ada not to call—it might be an infectious cold. I'll be all right in a day or two.'

'I'll come back tomorrow,' Rhoda promised. 'You know that I never catch anything.'

Swiftly she had flown downstairs to keep her unknown date with destiny.

For the first time she set up her portable easel alone in the public gallery, where one or two other students were already at work. She was wearing a white muslin summer dress striped with blue, and a floppy Leghorn hat with a black velvet ribbon. She felt thankful that puff-sleeves now ended on the forearm—it gave more freedom. Earnestly she set to work. . . .

An hour later, she looked up to see two imposing gentlemen observing her a few paces away. She scarcely noticed the second, for the taller of the two was the most handsome man she had ever seen. In dignity and benignity he was a revelation. He was better than anything she could have imagined—he was like an angel from heaven. Yet although she had never seen anyone like him before, she felt she knew him. As their eyes met, the moment tingled with delight, and then prolonged

itself in an eternity of its own. Her heart began to race with this mounting emotion—no, with this strange awareness.

The gentleman continued to return her gaze with increasing benevolence. He was Rhoda's idea of perfection. Her wonder melted in a smile of admiration. At the same instant she dropped her charcoal, oblivious that she had done so.

The Angel stepped forward and gracefully retrieved it in two bits. It was at this stage that his military companion, admiring the adroitness of the young lady's ruse, tactfully withdrew to a large landscape beyond, gradually working his way, masterpiece by masterpiece, out of earshot.

'Thank you,' Rhoda said fervently. 'Clumsy of me . . . but I was so surprised to see you there.'

'I too,' the Angel said, 'am in the same predicament. May I look at your canvas?'

For the first time Rhoda showed embarrassment. 'It is the preliminary drawing—and not as it should be. I've a passion for painting, but my drawing is weak.'

'May I?' the Angel lifted the bit of bread from her easel, and brushed out a certain amount of shadow here and there. The effect was magical. Apologetically he smiled: 'Let there be light, Signorina!'

Rhoda stared at her canvas. 'But it's wonderful now! I can scarcely believe I did it . . . Are you an artist?'

The Angel, efficiently trained in the arts and graces from his cradle, to say nothing of foreign relations and political economy, in all of which he held the appropriate degrees, now smiled in depreciation.

'Alas, as—the merest dilettante!'

'What a pity,' she exclaimed, 'with such a gift you could accomplish anything. Yes, I can see that, from the way you've brought out the modelling—' She lowered her voice, 'Will you do me a favour? Please have a look at that student's easel over there. He's at least three years younger than I am, and so much better that his canvas sometimes drives me to despair. Tell me what you think.' Her urgency astonished the Angel—

Obediently he walked away, hovering discreetly behind the other student, a weedy youth with pimples and a soiled shirt. But this individual had as well a craggy brow and agile hands—

and both these hands were busy on his picture at the same time. He gave the impression of sculpting rather than sketching, yet he was covering his canvas with surprising precision.

The Angel spent rather longer observing him than he intended, and then returned to the springtime nymph with her sombre interpretation.

Anxiously she whispered: 'He's very good, isn't he?'

Judicially the Angel agreed. 'A certain technical mastery—admittedly unusual at his age. But of course the final test of any artist is the fervour of his vision. Energy might be a better word—'

'Oh, thank you,' she interrupted, 'thank you from the heart. You don't know what this means to me—I just teem with ideas and energy.'

He bowed slightly. 'Half your battle is over then—there remains only that distinction of expression which will make these your own.'

Her face paled, to his surprise—he found he could read her present thought as easily as the one it had replaced. 'Haven't you forgotten perseverance? Surely that should count for something? Artists often have to struggle a lifetime.'

The Angel smiled calmly. 'The energy of his ideas will see to that.'

She frowned for a second, and this contraction of her bland brow gave him a twinge of compunction.

'You're right,' she said quickly. 'You've condensed the situation. Now it's as elegant as a conundrum.' Affably she nodded to him—she might have been his grandmother. But he had seen the foundations quiver for a moment, and was impressed by the courage of her recovery.

'You are happy in Florence?' he asked, with the solicitude that once more set him apart.

'Oh, yes,' she beamed. 'It is paradise. I come once a year with Aunt Ada and Miss Glossop—it is the crown of the whole year for us. We long to stay on and on, but of course that's not possible. Not at a wonderful hotel like the Excelsior—'

The Angel made a sympathetic murmur of agreement or condolence, and next heard that in the past Aunt Ada had often spent three months at a time at Florence. Present curtailment was only one of many sacrifices for her niece. At San Remo

Aunt Ada was now permanently on the top floor, where the heat was frightful in summer.

'But you too must feel this heat?' the Angel at last got a word in edgeways.

'No—not really. I give myself up to it: it's a knack I have. Things don't affect me as badly as other people. I was born lucky.'

'I can quite believe it,' but now the Angel's glance was humorous, and at once she challenged:

'Pride riding for a fall?'

Smoothly he replied, 'What of that—the experienced rider remounts at once.'

'Of course!' gratefully she smiled, and the Angel managed to insert a query:

'This friend of yours—Miss Glossop . . . the name is familiar?'

'She's very well known in Florence,' Rhoda assured him. 'She would be here this morning too, but she has caught a cold.'

'Oh,' the Angel nodded, 'commiserations!'

'Yes,' Rhoda told him, 'I usually collect her at her cousin's home. It saves her quite a lot of money staying at the Palazzo Galeota—though, of course, in some ways she would rather be with us at the Excelsior.'

'Ah,' the Angel observed, in his appreciative way, but for the first time it occurred to Rhoda that her news might not be of such interest after all to a stranger, no matter how exceptional he was. Yet how else to keep this fascinating conversation going—as she dare scarcely question him? For one thing, he looked considerably older—

'I hope,' she ventured, 'that you too are happy in Florence?'

He bowed: 'I also am in paradise—although, alas, my hotel is not the Excelsior.'

'Which reminds me,' hastily she arose, 'I must go! I always join Aunt Ada there at noon. It's such a pity—please forgive me.' Earnestly she added, 'I do hope that we shall meet again.'

The Angel bowed, his smile scraphic, 'We must—and lest your aunt should think I trespass, here is my card.'

He opened a slim leather case, and bestowed a card.

'Oh, thank you,' she smiled up at him, but did not glance

at the card. 'My aunt's name is Fanshawe—Miss Ada Fanshawe.'

'And yours?' the Angel asked, with a tender seriousness that made this the most important question she had ever heard.

Regretfully she shook her head. 'I don't like my Christian name. 'I've never liked it. My surname is Mead.'

'I insist,' the Angel said solemnly, 'in sharing this burden with you. I have five Christian names—only one of which I can endure. What is yours?'

Turning her face away, she said almost crossly: 'Rhoda.'

'Rhoda!' he exclaimed, 'but that is a wonderful name! The Greek for a rose.'

'Rose is better,' she agreed.

'Rhoda is best,' he smiled.

At that she glanced up again, and said with a sudden, sweet, unexpected docility, 'If you say so—it is so. You would always be right, in the end.'

Rather hurriedly the Angel left her. For the first time in a romantic situation, he was not quite sure where he was.

Rhoda looked lovingly at his card—and then, with a start, she read it.

She was first amazed, then thrilled—and finally subdued. She already knew a great deal about Prince Vicenza through Miss Glossop—for who in Florence did not?

Prince Vicenza had married a woman old enough to be his mother! And this although he was already rich, handsome and gifted.

'Their estates marched,' Miss Glossop had explained, but Aunt Ada had been critical:

'A lot of use now, when they have no children!'

'God's ways are mysterious,' Miss Glossop had sighed.

'Or man's short-sighted,' Miss Fanshawe retorted.

'Ada,' Miss Glossop had insisted, 'Florence adores him, and so does Rome—although he spends so much time at Milan. Carlotta assures me that the Princess would have been impossible at any age—a woman who lives only for horses.'

With a flushed face, Rhoda folded her easel . . .

In an hour her life had flowered and finished—it was frightful! No, it isn't, she told herself fiercely. I shall love him for ever. I don't care what anyone says about him. There must

have been a reason. Nobody's going to spoil this—why, it's the most wonderful thing that ever happened . . . just to know he exists. And that we met—alone too. Yes, it was meant to happen. And we recognized each other at a glance—I could see he was astonished too. But we knew each other . . . oh, what a moment that was! Life is a miracle— Why, he's as near me now, as when he stood beside me. He's an angel—as powerful absent as present. Oh, what an experience!

She floated back to the hotel in a golden haze.

'How about Betsy?' Miss Fanshawe asked.

'How about what?' Rhoda repeated stupidly—Miss Glossop had ceased to exist.

'Is she coming to the concert with us this afternoon?'

'No . . . no,' Rhoda replied with increasing decision. 'She means to spend the afternoon with the Contessa. She sends her loving regrets.'

'Natural enough,' Miss Fanshawe said, 'after a morning devoted to you. We shall miss her, of course. But something is due to her hostess. Tomorrow I'll look in on you both at the gallery, and see how the picture progresses.'

'Oh, no, please wait till Thursday,' Rhoda urged, 'or even Friday. I may have made more progress by then. In fact, I know I shall—' she blushed.

What a sensitive creature she is, Miss Fanshawe thought, half impatiently.

By Thursday Rhoda had made a great deal of progress, and so too had the Prince at the gallery. Each time Colonel Holstein accompanied him, but after a few compliments on her canvas, the equerry had devoted his attention to remoter works of art.

On Thursday the Prince was for the first time emphatic that Miss Fanshawe must be told. Despite his angelic smile, it was abundantly plain to Rhoda that he meant this.

'Tomorrow,' he said quietly, 'I shall hope to meet Miss Fanshawe here. It is one hundred pities that Miss Glossop is still confined to the Palazzo Galcota.'

Mournfully Rhoda said: 'She is practically cured—but if Aunt Ada comes tomorrow to the gallery, nothing will be the same again. I can't explain. Your—I mean my position is not what it might be. Aunt Ada may make difficulties—'

'Leave that to me,' he said with celestial calm, for of course he did not know Aunt Ada.

'What you don't realize,' Rhoda told him, 'is that I have hidden Miss Glossop's cold from Aunt Ada—for how else could I have come here three mornings without either?'

'Ah!' with the most heavenly perception his gaze rested upon her. 'In that case, I would counsel a confession first to Miss Glossop. It is perhaps the only one that you will have to make.'

And so it proved. Miss Glossop was electrified by Rhoda's news.

'You must tell your Aunt at once that you have met Prince Vicenza—as he says, you should have done so sooner. I'm thankful that Colonel Holstein was there each time. That makes it a delightful encounter, but Ada is always apprehensive. Oh, dear me—if only I had not been ill. No, no, don't give that silly taradiddle another thought! It will only upset Ada. Tell her that I feared to worry her over my cold—that each day I thought I'd be up. And now, hurry back. Be the first to tell her—for in Florence the statues have eyes in the back of their heads. Tongues too!'

Miss Fanshawe received the Prince's card with a slight frown of surprise. 'Why should he present you with this, simply because he picked up your charcoal?'

'He thought I should give his card to *you*, Aunt Ada.'

Miss Fanshawe looked across at her niece. 'Why didn't he give it to Betsy?'

'She wasn't there—that was the morning she didn't come. She's had a bad cold, but didn't want to worry you.'

'Rhoda,' Miss Fanshawe said coldly, 'have you met Prince Vicenza more than once there?'

Rhoda paled. 'Yes, Aunt Ada,' she said firmly, 'he and Colonel Holstein have been there several times. Many of the pictures are gifts from his family. He is very illustrious. The gallery practically belongs to him. That is why he most politely said he hoped to see you there.'

There was a slight pause in which Rhoda fully returned her aunt's gaze.

Stiffly Miss Fanshawe said: 'I have no choice now but to meet him—as he and others have apparently seen you there

alone. Florence is not San Remo, Rhoda, and I'm very much afraid that you may have given these gentlemen quite a wrong impression.'

'Oh, *no*, Aunt Ada—both have been courtesy itself. Colonel Holstein is quite as punctilious as you are, and as for the Prince—' her face shone, 'he is an angel from heaven.'

Miss Fanshawe frowned again, she was more upset than she dared admit to herself. Crisply she retorted, 'An angel with a wife at Padua, I understand. Only a school-girl would forget this.'

Luncheon was a less satisfactory meal than usual, but Miss Fanshawe's anxiety eased considerably at dinner with the arrival of Miss Glossop, and the information that Prince Vicenza must be at least thirty-six years old. No girl of Rhoda's age would be likely to lose her heart to a man fifteen years older than herself! Rhoda's admiration was probably youthful hero-worship. And of course the romantic interest of his title. A mistake perhaps to pay too much attention to the incident. But she would certainly visit the gallery with Rhoda tomorrow. Betsy ought to have forbidden her to go there alone. Rhoda herself had behaved with a suspicious lack of candour. However, perhaps no harm had been done. Once Miss Fanshawe appeared on the scene, the gallery attendants and the other students would have less to gossip about—Miss Fanshawe knew Florence by this time, if anyone did.

Next morning at eleven they entered the gallery, later than usual as a subdued Rhoda had not been allowed to bring her easel. For different reasons, but the same man, both hearts were beating more quickly than was comfortable.

At the entrance to the sculpture vestibule they suddenly met the Prince and Colonel Holstein. It was a confrontation, but Miss Fanshawe had to admit that Rhoda made the introduction with simplicity and ease. Almost at once Rhoda was in conversation with Colonel Holstein, and Miss Fanshawe found herself gazing into the grave eyes of the angel with a wife at Padua.

'Prince Vicenza,' she said formally, 'I much regret any unfortunate impression which my niece may have given. You will realize that she is younger than her years—or she would have known better than come to the gallery alone.'

'Miss Fanshawe,' he replied calmly, no, sadly, 'the impression she has made is wholly admirable—and indelible. Now, let me show you a secret resemblance which I do not intend her to see—' and he drew Miss Fanshawe into the next room. Opposite the Primavera he stopped, and said: 'There you see, she is one of the three Graces. Botticelli has already immortalized her—'

Miss Fanshawe gave a slight exclamation. She has seen this picture repeatedly, but never before had she noticed this astonishing resemblance. The figure with her right arm raised and pearls in her hair was Rhoda to the life.

'And long may Euphrosyne remain joy,' he said quietly.

Acting on impulse, Miss Fanshawe looked up and courageously said: 'Mortals can find that difficult, Prince Vicenza. My little niece is a dreamer. She has already decided that you are an angel.'

Steadily he returned her gaze. 'You and I,' he said distinctly, 'must do our best not to disillusion her there.'

Miss Fanshawe was reassured. As they passed through the gallery the Prince drew her attention to unusual features in pictures she had known for years. He has insight as well as charm, she noted—and then had to remind herself that this also could be a hazard.

But the occasion passed off more pleasantly than she expected, and it was something of a shock to find him and Colonel Holstein the following evening at the Forza Concert—seated quite close to them. Greetings were exchanged in the interval, and the Prince asked permission to call upon Miss Fanshawe later. Before that event took place, Miss Fanshawe had the additional agitation of finding the Prince and two members of his suite at the Contessa Galeota's picnic-party. In vain did Miss Glossop assure her that her cousin had only broken this news as the carriages set off . . . It was the most unsatisfactory picnic Miss Fanshawe had yet attended—no one sat still for two minutes. The Prince on all occasions was decorum itself, but Rhoda's radiant face confirmed all her aunt's worst fears. The fact that Miss Fanshawe found that she too liked the Prince, although reluctantly, simply proved how dangerous he was. She was now thoroughly uneasy.

A week later, a theatre party was arranged by the Contessa,

and short of quarrelling with the Galeotas, and breaking Betsy Glossop's heart, Miss Fanshawe, with nothing but her own unworthy suspicions to excuse her, was forced to accept. In due course Miss Fanshawe found herself seated in the stalls between Conte Galeota and his venerable father, while among the other guests, the Contessa and Rhoda sat one on either side of the Prince—and this for a whole evening, while *La Traviata* enchanted all but the unhappy Aunt Ada.

Miss Fanshawe now decided that she and Rhoda would return to San Remo a week earlier than they had intended.

Next morning she announced this at breakfast, which she always had in bed, and was astounded by Rhoda's rebellious attitude:

'Why, why, why,' she cried, 'when we've never had such an exciting time before, so many invitations, and all those new fascinating people? And, look, there's a letter from the Prince on your plate!'

Angrily Miss Fanshawe demanded: 'How do *you* know his writing?'

Rhoda blushed, and hesitated. 'It has his emblem on it. Oh, *please* read it before I go downstairs. I can hardly wait.'

'Rhoda,' and Miss Fanshawe's voice shook. 'I am very displeased with all this foolish excitement. It is highly improper. Prince Vicenza is a married man—'

She stopped short—to her alarm Rhoda had suddenly flared up fiercely:

'Don't throw that in my teeth! He can't help it—neither can I. And anyway they've lived apart for years.'

Horrified her aunt stared at her. 'How do you know that?'

'Everybody knows it, and everybody sympathizes with him. You have only to ask anyone in Florence—but from the beginning you've been prejudiced against him—'

Miss Fanshawe's knees beneath her bed-coverlet began to tremble.

'Everyone knows he's an angel. I saw it, at a glance. And nothing will ever change me, Aunt Ada, nothing, nothing, nothing! I shall love him till I die—'

And she rushed from the bedroom.

Miss Fanshawe, stunned for a second, mechanically opened the Prince's letter—a gracious request to visit her that

afternoon. Five o'clock was suggested . . . or any other hour that suited Miss Fanshawe.

Gone was Miss Fanshawe's momentary paralysis. She was now ready to deal with the situation. That the Prince wished to call on her was an earnest of his good faith.

Hastily she rose, dressed, and dispatched a note of confirmation to the Prince's hotel. She would enlist his help. This nonsense must be ended at its source. He would realize the danger to himself as well as to this foolish girl. Foreigners, whether they were princes or commoners were forthright in their grasp of this particular situation.

Rhoda was not to be found in their small sitting-room, a luxury they only had in Florence where their friends and Miss Glossop's relations could be suitably received. Nor was she to be found in the lounge or in the hotel garden—

Miss Fanshawe told the hall porter to call a *carrozzella* and drive to the Palazzo Galcota, but neither Rhoda nor Betsy was there. Miss Fanshawe hurried to the gallery—but saw no sign of them.

Disturbed she returned to her own hotel. Resolutely she dismissed a fear that Rhoda in her excited state might call upon the Prince at his hotel—such a step was unthinkable.

Rhoda was discovered, dejected, in their sitting-room, a narrow, high chamber, its formality festive as a florist's with the bouquets bestowed by their many friends.

Tearfully Rhoda apologized for her behaviour. 'I felt quite desperate, so I took a *carrozzella* and went to Fiesole. Nature always calms me. I hope you don't mind. I know it was a needless expense—'

'Forget it,' Miss Fanshawe was much relieved. 'Prince Vicenza is calling upon me at five today, so you will have to go alone to the Galcotas for tea. Make my excuses to them and Betsy. You may remain there for dinner. I intend to rest.'

'Yes, Aunt Ada,' Rhoda said mournfully. 'I do hope that you will come to understand *him* better. When I think how happy we might all be together in this beautiful place—'

Frostily Miss Fanshawe changed the subject . . .

At four o'clock Rhoda departed to the Palazzo Galcota, fervently kissing her aunt—Miss Fanshawe might have been on the point of departure for another world.

At five o'clock Prince Vicenza was shown into Miss Fanshawe's sitting-room. He was announced by the manager of the hotel himself—a favour never before bestowed on any of her guests.

Miss Fanshawe, reinforced by the fact that at Florence her position was more impressive than at San Remo, received the Prince with dignity. Of a nervous temperament, she invariably showed her true mettle once steel was bared. She was now ready for the fray—and opened attack with a directness that surprised the Prince. He was delighted with her. The dear lady had thus spared him the embarrassment of preamble—

When they were seated she said abruptly: 'Prince Vicenza, I welcome this opportunity of a few words alone with you. And I shall be grateful for your help in a matter concerning my niece—'

Attentively he listened. To her dismay, the words with which she was already primed were evaporating—this important occasion was becoming an encounter with a dominant personality, her own familiar room a trifling background for his compelling presence.

'Pray continue,' he encouraged her. 'It is of Rhoda that I too wish to speak.'

Rhoda—Miss Fanshawe's thin cheek flushed. Stiffly she said, 'My niece is much younger than her years—you will have realized this. And with the veneration she naturally feels for your illustrious rank, and age, she has most foolishly conceived a romantic regard. Your Highness will realize what a tiresome embarrassment those girlish infatuations can be. I have warned her that I mean to leave Florence next week with her. And I shall greatly appreciate it if you will do anything needful to discourage this predilection of hers. There is not only her youth to consider, but your own august position.'

'Miss Fanshawe,' the Prince said distinctly, indeed with emphasis, 'it is too late.'

'*Too late?*' Miss Fanshawe was aghast. She ceased to be dominated. She addressed him as peremptorily as she would Rhoda. 'What do you mean?'

'That I have come to my decision. I came to it two days after I met your niece. I love her deeply—'

Miss Fanshawe's indignation boiled up, and over—'You love her? But this is lunacy. Have you spoken to Rhoda, have you let her imagine—'

'That has not been necessary,' he said calmly. 'We are completely *en rapport*. This is the first experience of that kind which I have known. And I believe it to be extremely rare between any two persons. As I say: I have come to my decision. I wish to settle a considerable sum of money on your niece right away. I do not propose a trust, but an immediate and final gift that will make your niece independent for life—with you, I hope, as her permanent guest.'

Miss Fanshawe's eyes narrowed. Ironically she retorted: 'A gift with the usual proviso, of course! We have heard of these before!'

For the first time hauteur invested the Prince:

'Madame, in this situation I am a lover—not a philanthropist. The proviso you mention will not appear on any document. That decision will rest entirely with your niece. Three conditions only must she fulfil: she must change her name by deed-poll; London must become her home; and under no circumstances must she again visit Italy. For the rest, she is as free as air—as regards your proviso as well.'

'Prince Vicenza,' Miss Fanshawe's voice shook with anger, 'I am almost beyond speech. You apparently wish me to sanction this outrageous proposal. You, a Prince, a married man, a Roman Catholic—'

Equally, this time, he raised his hand. 'Were I not a Roman Catholic, there would still be no divorce. My marriage is an alliance—a legal contract. For years it has been nothing more, but it shall stand. The Princess and I have enjoyed an amicable separation for the past eight years.'

A small hectic patch appeared on Miss Fanshawe's cheek bones:

'And you suggest that Rhoda, my niece, should become—' she balked at the word mistress, it was too vulgar, too commonplace for her sense of outrage, '*a concubine* to meet the exigencies of your situation?'

The Prince shook his head, and again his tone was short. 'None will regard her as such, if the arrangements which I have made with my solicitors at Milan are carried through.'

Miss Fanshawe could scarcely credit her senses. 'You have presumed to make arrangements with your solicitors already—'

'Yes,' he said quietly, 'and I have brought a copy of the two relevant documents with me, for your approval—'

Miss Fanshawe arose trembling. 'Prince Vicenza, that you will never have—and you know it.'

Both standing, they faced each other. 'Madame,' he said in a tone of grave reproof, 'this situation has also confronted me with serious problems. But I have been determined to overcome these. As I trust you will too, for Rhoda's sake. I intend to devote the rest of my life to her happiness—and as much of my time as can be called my own. But in my absence there will be certain periods when she will need your companionship. Meantime, I suggest that you show these two documents to your solicitor—' he laid a long envelope on the bureau, adding as he did so, 'I can assure you that I would never have ventured on this course, despite my love for her, had it not been for her character—'

Miss Fanshawe's jaw dropped, but before she could speak, the Prince continued calmly:

'Her temperament is romantic, but she has two other qualities that are not always found united in a woman. She is essentially practical—and she is also intrepid. I feel my fate will be safe with her.'

ICILY Miss Fanshawe exclaimed, '*Your* fate! History has grim examples of such sacrifices by women. You appear incapable of thinking of *her* fate.'

'Madame,' he said austere, 'her fate resides in the fact that I am a man of my word. I have nothing more to add. I sympathize with your predicament. The situation is not what anyone would choose. But *you* will have to be very certain,' and the severity of his tone increased, 'that the *alternative* to it will, finally, benefit Rhoda as much—'

Bowing to her, he left the room.

Stunned as Miss Fanshawe was, convention convicted her as the door closed: she ought to have had him escorted downstairs—courtesy demanded this . . .

Instead, she rang and ordered some strong tea. Not until she had drunk this, did she open the long envelope.

It contained two documents, in English, both bearing the name and address of solicitors at Milan . . . their name was dimly familiar.

The first that Miss Fanshawe opened was the proposed Deed of Gift. After the usual legal preamble, the sum cited occurred—

Miss Fanshawe took off her *pince-nez*, and cleared this with her handkerchief. She thought her sight had failed—but in adjusting her glasses again, the same amount confronted her. Miss Fanshawe, unlike her sister Mab, had always had a shrewd grasp of figures—and this munificent sum dealt her a deadly blow. For the first time Prince Vicenza's sincerity was dangerously apparent.

Resolutely she read on, and found the gist as he had said. This gift was to be paid by the Italian solicitors through the London firm of Cadogan Coutts and Vyse. As far as Miss Fanshawe could see the Prince's name did not once appear on this document. The second was a missive in which the undersigned undertook for various good and sufficient reasons, and by deed-poll, the change of name that the Prince had also mentioned to Miss Fanshawe; and again for the same good and sufficient reasons to confine her domicile to London; and her travels to countries other than Italy.

Miss Fanshawe continued to re-read these papers for half an hour, with increasing shock. Any situation embarrassing to either party was here most skilfully met. From her school-days Miss Fanshawe had received historic warnings of wickedness in high places, but never had she suspected that such persons could be so orderly, so provident in their arrangements for all concerned. It was truly alarming. Every possible contingency, each practical consideration had been foreseen by this bold outline and briefly *squared*. Miss Fanshawe shuddered as that last unpleasant word escaped her, yet it most aptly described this legal achievement. That any illustrious personage should show such diabolical cunning—

There, Miss Fanshawe had in ignorance overrated the Prince. These arrangements had been reluctantly drawn up by Colonel Holstein, who had earlier spent twenty years as aide to the Prince's uncle, a gentleman of such experienced gallantry that Colonel Holstein had later been enabled to

profit from all the dangers and devices of dalliance. So effectively were the present arrangements the result of past expensive errors on the part of the Prince's uncle, that Rocchia and Gaddi of Milan, with a certain admiration now, had merely transcribed these details in one voluminous sentence that covered four crackling parchment sheets in one case, and two in the other.

The only item in the settlement of which Colonel Holstein remained unaware was the sum that had staggered Miss Fanshawe. The Prince, a much less experienced lover than his uncle had yet enough hereditary acumen to prevent his right hand knowing what was due from his left.

Miss Fanshawe replaced the documents in their envelope. This Machiavellian plan, with its permanent place for the aunt in its luxurious ménage, was devilishly ideal. But she too had influence in Florence, a distinguished circle of friends, and would use this—right away.

Thankfully she remembered that Rhoda was dining with the Galcotas—then hastily she wrote a note to Sir Hartley Eustace, asking if she might see him at his home that night, after dinner, on a private matter of some urgency. She marked the envelope: await answer.

Within an hour the hotel messenger had brought back the reply. Sir Hartley would be delighted to receive her.

Without appetite, Miss Fanshawe methodically ate through dinner—she would need all her strength.

Tonight she mourned Lady Eustace's death afresh—a girlhood friend, and of a nature more closely akin than her own sister's had ever been. What a comfort it would have been to have shared this bomb-shell with Letty . . . But she had the highest opinion of Sir Hartley—she had consulted him on important matters in the past, although always careful not to trespass on his patience. After all, he had once been England's most eminent Q.C. It was in a crisis like the present that a man's advice was essential.

And the very sight of his dignified villa that summer evening steadied her. She rarely had the slightest nostalgia for England, but now she noticed with satisfaction that there was something very English about his striped awnings. The British barometer in the hall was another pleasant pointer;

the grandfather clock an added support; and with the mahogany furniture in Sir Hartley's study she knew she was back on home-ground, despite the silver-green gloom of the Italian garden, and the fountain jet pricking the southern silence.

Observantly, he rose to greet her—a tall, thin man with the cool thin hand of a skeleton. His lined, secretive face was in curious contrast to his mellow, resonant voice.

Miss Fanshawe began without delay: 'I'm extremely worried about Rhoda—' then she discovered she was short of breath.

'Is she ill?'

Acidly Miss Fanshawe replied, 'She has never looked better—but she has, unfortunately lost both her heart *and* her head.' Briefly, she related the situation—the two documents still in her reticule, their details unrevealed.

Sir Hartley was silent for a minute, and nervously Miss Fanshawe said: 'You haven't heard any rumours?'

'Not a word,' he assured her. 'Prince Vicenza's reputation is much too assured for tittle-tattle to trifle with it. At Rhoda's age sentimental attachments are to be expected. You say she is wildly romantic. She falls in and out of love quickly, I suppose?'

'No,' Miss Fanshawe hesitated. 'I must admit that this is the first time she has shown any sign of falling in love.'

'And she is twenty-one. Don't you think that rather belated in a romantic?'

'Yes and no—she tends to be critical. And, of course, young men don't like that. Prince Vicenza is fifteen years older than she is—much too old, in any case.'

Sir Hartley gave a wintry smile. 'Don't attach importance to that. Women vary in their tastes. Aristotle maintained that fifteen years was the ideal difference between a man and a woman in love. No, Ada, this dilemma must be faced, not evaded. I'm quite sure your sense of humour will not desert you. This particular situation has arisen before, and will again. It is at least reassuring that the Prince has made his—er—infamous proposal first through you.'

Miss Fanshawe was nettled. 'Surely you understand my indignation?'

'Very well indeed,' he said easily. 'But let us get this clear:

I am quite unable to advise you on the moral aspect of the problem. That is your responsibility—as far as it concerns you. I can only give you the benefit of a professional view of the case.'

At the word case, Miss Fanshawe's heart sank—so swiftly had the situation entered the sphere of consequences. The fact that the Prince should instantly have invoked the assistance of the law, in the brazen way he had, was another feature that had astounded her. And now she found herself strangely chilled by Sir Hartley's first reaction.

'May I see those papers?' he said pleasantly.

She handed them over, and he adjusted the lamp at his elbow.

As he saw the name of the Milan attorneys, 'So-ho!' he exclaimed. 'Rocchia and Gaddi!' Miss Fanshawe, who could not follow this wry jocularly, remained silent.

When he had read both documents, he sat back and stared at her in expostulation: 'The man must be completely infatuated!'

'No doubt,' she said frigidly, 'but that does not make him less of a libertine.'

'At his age,' Sir Hartley enunciated, 'libertines do not entangle themselves with settlements like this. Do you realize that once this gift is made, your niece can walk out of the situation the next day, or any other she pleases? Have you told her what he proposes to do?'

'No, and I do not intend to do so. She is absurdly young for her age. In her present excitable state it might be disastrous.'

Curtly he said, 'Then let me warn you that it will be much more disastrous if she should throw her cap over the mill before these arrangements are made. In my opinion, the sooner you show her these papers the better. She is of age—and without your permission can quite easily make a bolt for it.'

Miss Fanshawe's face paled. Sir Hartley added more mildly, 'I've known that to happen before, so I recommend you to do nothing to estrange her, or to precipitate events.'

Miss Fanshawe drew in her breath sharply. 'There must be some way of protecting Rhoda—'

'That is apparently what he wishes to do. The sum

proposed to safeguard her future is more than generous. It might be considered munificent. The Prince is taking a risk too, of course. A great deal will depend throughout on the circumspection of—er—the other party—'

Heatedly Miss Fanshawe interrupted. 'Risks! What about the risks *she* is asked to take?'

'Quite so,' Sir Hartley agreed. 'Money is not all—although in this case it amounts to a very great deal.'

Miss Fanshawe's thin face flamed, 'An innocent young girl,' she began.

'Well, of course,' Sir Hartley said testily, 'if Rhoda were not an attractive young woman, this situation would not have arisen. I repeat: I cannot advise you on the moral aspect of the case. I can only warn you that if you obstruct this settlement, she may proceed without it.'

There was a brief silence in which Miss Fanshawe with difficulty summoned control. Frigidly she said: 'I shall confine myself to the business aspect then. You regard this firm in Milan as reliable?'

In the face of such abysmal ignorance, Sir Hartley did not reply for a second. Then he retorted: 'As the Bank of England. Now . . .' he raised a monitory finger, 'should this left-handed union come to pass, remember this for your comfort: we know a good deal more about the Prince's assets *and* disadvantages as a partner than we are likely to know beforehand of any ordinary 'Tom, Dick or Harry. Snags exist in conventional unions too, you know. So take what solace you can from this. And if it happens—don't lose your head, although Rhoda has lost her heart.'

Miss Fanshawe could not speak. She was more appalled by this speech of Sir Hartley's than by anything the Prince had said or done.

She rose, thanked him almost voicelessly for his courtesy, and was escorted to her *carrozzella* by her host.

Bowing to him with unseeing eyes, she was driven off. Not only had Sir Hartley exploded his life long reputation for reliability, he had calamitously undermined her own conviction of what was best for Rhoda—

It was the most dreadful day that Miss Fanshawe had ever known.

She reached her hotel at half past ten to find Rhoda panic-stricken in the hall.

'Where have you been at such an hour? Aunt Ada, I've been distracted about you!'

It was the first satisfactory reaction Miss Fanshawe had had in a hideous evening. By the time the door of their little sitting-room had closed upon them, both were in tears on each other's shoulder.

'Oh, dear, *dear* Aunt Ada,' Rhoda sobbed, 'I've felt so guilty! You've never gone out alone like this at night. I thought you might have been run over in the street. Or worse still—committed suicide.'

'Suicide!' indignantly Miss Fanshawe recovered, 'why should I, of all people, commit suicide? Rhoda, you must control this unruly imagination. You are positively bizarre. People only excuse it in you because you are immature. Were you any older, I can assure you they would simply shrug you off as eccentric. I have merely visited an old friend.' And she rang for tea.

By the time second cups had been drunk, they were considerably restored. Any two men, after such a day, would have seized this opportunity and gone to bed, but like a couple of witches each clung to conflict, believing firmness would win.

'Only tell me what Prince Vicenza said, Aunt Ada—and if any plans were made this afternoon?'

'Plans—what plans could be made? I've told you: we both return to San Remo next week.'

'No, I can't bear it—and I won't. Oh, *please* wait another week.'

'Rhoda, what difference can a week make? We must terminate an impossible situation.'

'It might make all the difference in the world. And I warn you, Aunt Ada, that if you insist, I won't humiliate you—I'll go back to San Remo with you. But I won't remain. I'll get a teaching post in Venice or—or Milan . . . where I can see him sometimes. I'm not a child. I'm over twenty-one. Why shouldn't we be friends?'

Disdainfully Miss Fanshawe looked at her. 'You know only too well why you can't be friends. Now answer me this: Has the Prince ever made you a declaration?'

Rhoda flushed. 'No . . . not in so many words. We don't need words, he and I. But to go back to San Remo before anything's settled—'

'Settled?' Miss Fanshawe demanded angrily, 'what can be settled? Explain yourself.'

'I thought . . . I hoped—things can't go on like this. . . .'

'I should think not! Yet in the folly of your infatuation you propose to throw yourself at a married man's head.'

Hotly Rhoda cried, 'No, I don't! I *know* he feels the same. Once when I asked him if we'd ever meet again, he told me to have faith, to leave it all to him. That's what I'm doing now. That's why I felt that perhaps today he'd said something to you—'

Sharply Miss Fanshawe said: 'I demand a truthful answer from you. Has he ever led you to believe that he loves you?'

Rhoda hesitated, and then shook her head mournfully. 'No, I've told you that already. Not in so many words. But he once said something just as important in another way. He said he was proof against sirens, but that I was more than that. He said: 'You are the song the sirens sing.' Don't you think that was a lovely thing to say?'

'I do not,' Miss Fanshawe retorted. 'And I think it shocking that after all the devotion spent on your education and training, you should talk of love where love is forbidden.'

Rhoda nodded vigorously. 'Shocking to you,' she agreed huskily. 'Painful to me. But nothing's going to change it. It's happened.'

Miss Fanshawe lost her temper. 'Go to your bed—I'm disgusted with you.'

Next day, as Miss Fanshawe was gloomily breakfasting, Rhoda ran into her room, her face shining—'Oh, Aunt, I've had a letter from him—the very first. He says that later this week you may have some important news for me—and that meantime he is leaving Florence—so that you and I may think things over quietly. Oh, Aunt, now you need not go back to San Remo before we meant to!'

Miss Fanshawe did not reply. She lifted the solicitors' envelope from the bedside table, and said acidly:

'These are the papers he left. You had better read them—by yourself.'

An hour later Rhoda found Miss Fanshawe in their sitting-room. The girl's face had a pale, chastened look, and obviously she had been weeping. Miss Fanshawe's heart leapt thankfully—sacrifice was written all over Rhoda.

'I've never read anything like it,' Rhoda whispered. 'I'm just not worthy. It's a miracle—'

'A miracle!' Miss Fanshawe rose in fury.

'Such generosity—oh, it's never been equalled!'

'Such shamelessness,' Miss Fanshawe trembled, 'this too has never been equalled. You horrify me—'

Rhoda's pupils dilated, her grey eyes looked almost black—it might have been Irish Hereward Mead himself defying Miss Fanshawe. 'And you horrify *me*!' Rhoda burst out. 'Do you want to ruin my life?'

Nothing she might have said could have affected her aunt as disastrously as those words. Miss Fanshawe sank back on her chair. For the second time in a few hours she took refuge in a weakness she despised—she wept.

Kneeling beside her Rhoda wept too.

'Forgive me, forgive me . . .' she urged.

Bitterly Miss Fanshawe affirmed, 'I shall never forgive you. . . .'

It was all over. A fortnight later Miss Fanshawe and her niece returned to San Remo, on the date originally planned. But three days before this, Rhoda had travelled to the offices of the ducal attorneys at Milan.

Miss Glossop accompanied her—on Miss Fanshawe's orders.

Thereafter, Miss Fanshawe declined to speak to either of them for a week. . . .

That winter Rhoda sailed on the Prince's yacht for the Crimea. On their return she and the Prince went direct to the Villa at Regent's Park, where Marco awaited them. It was the longest period she and the Prince were ever to have together. . . .

Looking back now, Mrs. Betterton-Best realized why it had been thus arranged. She was being fitted for her part—and had quite a lot to learn!

Tonight, she recognized afresh that all the delights of that idyllic cruise had not given her half the joy of that first

day in her new home in London. All her happiest hours with Charles were to be spent there. . . . 4

In April 1902 Miss Fanshawe left San Remo, and took up her residence at the Villa. Every summer Miss Glossop joined them there.

Miss Fanshawe had thawed by fits and starts. In fact, the Prince knew that she had forgiven him before Miss Fanshawe herself knew this.

At the end of a year, Rhoda had sighed to him: 'We can't expect her to get over the situation *completely* you know.'

'Why not?'

'Well, for one thing she doesn't love you as much as I do.'

The Prince could understand that, he said—and it seemed to amuse him. But he could not follow her aunt's scruples—Miss Fanshawe did not strike him as a religious woman.

'That's why it's harder for her,' Rhoda explained. 'She's a woman of principle—and a principle can't unbend and forgive. She's in a different world from mine. I haven't the courage for hers.'

The Prince considered Rhoda for a second. 'You do very well in your own.'

Rhoda smiled. 'You give me strength. If you'd ever loved me less, I should have failed . . . I won't deny I've had my panic moments!'

'Such as?' he asked quietly.

'No, no,' she laughed, 'don't cross-examine me! Clay feet crumble. I must stand firm. So much joy depends on it!'

That first August at the Villa, London had been festive with King Edward's postponed coronation. Many distinguished foreign visitors had been absent, but the gala occasion had been memorable none the less, and both Miss Fanshawe and Miss Glossop felt that this was London at its best—as they used to remember it . . . brilliant pageantry that no other country could rival. In Rhoda's beautiful Villa, where she so prettily deferred to both of them, they were happier than Miss Fanshawe dared admit to herself.

It was three years later that her Aunt's health began to fail, and Rhoda decided that it might be better not to venture abroad that winter.

Miss Glossop had died at San Remo, during the autumn, and her aunt's vitality had declined steadily since. She was not so much ill as languid, and Rhoda noticed that the six white linen handkerchiefs which Miss Fanshawe was embroidering for Christmas were taking a long time to complete. They bore Charles's initials, and were the first present that Miss Fanshawe had herself sewn for the Prince.

She died in her sleep on Christmas Eve, and Rhoda later found the handkerchiefs neatly folded in a crisp square of tissue-paper. All her aunt's work and ways were characterized by the same immaculate quality . . .

Tonight Mrs. Betterton-Best realized another thing for the first time—

She and Charles did not have their first quarrel until after Miss Fanshawe's death. It was as if Aunt Ada, alive beside them, had held a watching-brief for security . . . and in her absence carelessness intervened. Earlier, of course, there had been certain skirmishes between Rhoda and the Prince. The inevitable tussle of wills had taken place. The Prince invariably won those contests, for he was a calmer opponent, and reason, if not justice, was usually on his side.

Their first and second quarrels were, however, serious matters. And although three years of peace were to elapse between these conflicts, in both contests the Prince was to fail signally.

The first incitement to battle shook Rhoda to the heart. Her health, usually robust, had failed for a time after Miss Fanshawe's death. Unhappily, too, there was a longer period than was customary between the Prince's visit in November, and their next meeting in February.

On this occasion they were to meet at a favourite hotel at Monte Carlo, where early spring sunshine would work wonders for Rhoda's health.

Her usual rapturous delight at re-union had become a passion of yearning by the time she reached Monaco. Never had she needed him so much. Miss Fanshawe's death was still an hourly loss.

It was by the merest chance that first night at Monte Carlo that they went to the theatre. From a box a rich Silesian magnate and his family had espied the Prince in the stalls.

In the foyer later they were accosted, and amid the effervescence of greeting, the Prince gave another hotel as his address.

As he drove back with Rhoda, 'My darling,' he said, 'there is nothing else for it—I must leave tonight. They will telephone early tomorrow morning.'

'But why? These are not people of any importance.' Rhoda by now had developed a sixth sense in such matters.

'Parvenus can gossip like anyone else. You heard them ask if they might telephone—as they're leaving next day. We shall only lose one night.'

'Out of a week,' Rhoda reminded him in an unusually small voice. For some reason she had begun to tremble in the gloom of the carriage, while Monte Carlo flashed past with intermittent brilliance.

But the Prince had other anxieties, and firmly said: 'We cannot afford to risk it.'

'I can,' Rhoda said in the same weak tone, 'and I have. You mean *you* can't.'

'My adorable child,' he said, 'what are you trying to say? You are tired out after your journey. Have a long night's sleep. I shall see those wretched Jauers for luncheon tomorrow, and be back with you by three o'clock.'

'If you must, you must,' Rhoda's reply was ominous, but man-like the Prince was determined to avail himself of the letter rather than the spirit of her statement.

On his way back at two-thirty next day, the Jauer embarrassment successfully tided over, it occurred to him that he had been, perhaps, too cautious. The Jauers would gossip in any case, and Rhoda had seemed so subdued when he said goodnight that he feared he had wounded her needlessly. To restore her gaiety, he would arrange to stay a whole week after all—no, ten days. It would not be easy—in fact it would mean important postponements, but it could and should be done!

Buoyantly he entered the charming hotel where they had often spent peaceful days and passionate nights—his brow benevolent.

As his luggage was carried upstairs, he paused at the hall porter's desk. There is no man in any hotel who knows more

and says less than he who bears that emblem of discretion on his collar, the crossed keys of many lands. Frederic was an old friend who knew that the Prince was travelling incognito.

'Is Madame upstairs or in the garden?'

Frederic was astonished. Did Monsieur not know? Madame had returned to London by the first train this morning—an unexpected summons.

The Prince did not move a muscle, but Frederic was not deceived—his illustrious client was dumbfounded.

'There is a letter, sir.'

By this time the Prince felt he was taking part in a familiar stage drama, and manfully resisted an impulse to open the envelope before his audience.

Walking into the garden, he found a secluded chair. He was extremely angry with his little love, and what upset him more—decidedly uneasy. Rhoda meant to punish him, but it was disturbingly unlike his happy darling to punish herself too.

If Rhoda's departure had astounded him, her letter amazed him still more. It was utterly unlike anything he had expected. It was very short and very gentle. With his exceptional foresight, she wrote, he had long ago realized that this sad break might come, and with his own unbounded generosity he had left her free to say goodbye should conditions prove impossible for her. This she now did sadly, yet with heart-felt gratitude, knowing well that he would respect her privacy from this date, as she had ever respected his. The letter was signed simply Rhoda.

This missive startled the Prince. Never before had Rhoda been so utterly unreasonable—never before so calm. An Englishman might have suspected that the little thing was ill, a Frenchman that another lover was somewhere in the offing. But, as the Italian in him had first expected rage from Rhoda's envelope, and the Russian flashed a warning of suicide at Regent's Park, so now his Austrian blood was chilled by this incredible embargo.

Regardless of discretion, he caught the next connexion for London, where he took up residence at the Carlton.

There he set about organizing the siege of Regent's Park. This, he discovered, demanded more finesse than silencing a

Silesian magnate at Monte Carlo. For one thing, the Prince, incognito, was virtually a prisoner at the Carlton, as the spectacle of Mr. Betterton-Best turned from his own front door at the Villa would have undone the work of years there.

At the Carlton the Prince remained for two weeks, to the stupefaction of various civic and military authorities in Italy. His sister, the Duchess of Zollfeld and Veit, a volcanic personality fourteen years older than her brother, wondered where the devil he had got to—and suspected the worst. Colonel Holstein at Milan declined to enlighten her, and continued to circulate vague excuses and apologies.

At the Villa in Regent's Park, a daily stream of telegraph boys at all hours, together with florists' deliveries gave rise to a belief in the Park that there was again a death on the premises. *The Times'* obituary columns gave no clue. Could Mrs. Betterton-Best be organizing another bazaar? It was scarcely the season for a garden-fête. Yet when delicatessen vans made their appearance, a marquee was hourly expected to raise its snowy peak among the trees that so tiresomely concealed the lawn of the Villa.

Meantime, captive at the Carlton, the Prince's plight became more difficult. An absence of visitors to his suite forced the management to conclude that some political crisis was brewing in Italy. Colour was given to this view by the arrival, at erratic hours, of a tall Italian, who might, or might not, be some sort of agent.

Marco, after four years at the Villa, would dutifully have died for Madame, yet he had no hesitation in secretly visiting the Carlton to apprise the Prince of the position on the home front.

Each time, with the mechanical repetition of a gramophone Marco recorded the steps which had led to this crisis. Each time the Prince listened patiently.

His Highness would appreciate that there had been the lamentable demise on Christmas Eve of Madame's venerable aunt. This had followed the death of the amiable Signorina Glossop that autumn. After the funeral of the esteemed Signorina Fanshawe, Madame suffered greatly. She lost all interest in her food. The visit to Monte Carlo had been

Marco's earnest hope. But what had happened? The inconceivable. In two minutes Madame had returned. Had His Highness ever heard of such a thing before? It was enough to kill a horse. Such experiences were beyond belief, and perhaps beyond recovery. That Madame had now held out at the Villa for so long was, in Marco's view, an indication that she could hold out for ever. Moreover, the table delicacies that were appearing by van had given offence to the cook. Marco was respectfully of the opinion that these should cease—

On Marco's final visit he had added a graver warning:

During the past few days Madame's appetite had notably improved, but Marco no longer regarded this as a favourable sign. He feared that Madame was hardening in her course.

In Marco's view, His Highness must therefore disobey Madame, and risk all by making a courtesy call at once. He, Marco, would announce him at nine o'clock tonight, and it was just possible that in these unexpected circumstances Madame would consent to come downstairs. Marco could not imagine that Madame would ever embarrass any visitor before her staff—still less His Illustrious Highness. . . .

This nine o'clock visit that night proved to be the only occasion in Prince Vicenza's experience when a courtesy call lasted ten days. . . .

As Mrs. Betterton-Best now remembered, it had been after that first quarrel that her love for the Villa became a passion. On that dreadful day of return from Monte Carlo, she had recognized it as her only sanctuary. Then she had been too young and fiercely egotistical to understand the Prince's attitude. But she had instantly grasped that the cancellation of any reunion meant a great deal less to him, because he, and he alone, could ordain the next at will. To live subject to this, as she had done in fond illusion until then, was no longer possible. She must entrench herself elsewhere, for to be thus vulnerable was hell. An element of reserve entered her ecstasy, as the Prince was not slow to note, and to assail—with such assiduity, in fact, that their next quarrel did not take place for three years.

These years proved idyllic, for Rhoda with sound sense pressed no further issue. Her Monte Carlo victory stood out

in dazzling admonition—a veritable lighthouse above reefs.

Their contest on the second occasion was of a more subtle sort. 'A bagatelle,' the Prince assured her, once more oblivious of danger.

Again it was the month of February, and Rhoda was in Berlin with her friends the Jebbs—a Berlin *en fête* in 1909 for the State Visit of King Edward and Queen Alexandra. There, for the first time, Rhoda had met Hugh Sondes, who as attaché at the Embassy was often of the Jebb party. During this pleasant period Rhoda was surprised to receive a telegram from the Prince that he too was arriving for the State Visit. . . .

With some difficulty Rhoda shed her friends, and met the Prince for luncheon at a quiet hotel. There, to his astonishment he heard that his little recluse would also be present on the royal occasion of the opera *Sardanapalus*, organized by the Kaiser himself in honour of King Edward.

In vain did he assure her that this would be impossible—how could he endure the thought of Rhoda alone in the stalls while he was seated in a box beyond.

'But I won't be alone. The Jebbs—don't you remember?—will be with me. And Hugh Sondes.'

'Who is Hugh Sondes?'

'A friend of the Jebbs.'

'Is he a bachelor?'

'Yes. And he has gone to endless trouble to get these seats for us. I had no idea you would be in Berlin too.'

'Rhoda,' the Prince came down abruptly to brass tacks, 'there may be people present on this important occasion who, in recognizing you, will be able to place my identity.'

'Charles,' she said with unusual precision, 'the Jebbs, like so many of my friends, have not had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Betterton-Best.'

'My darling,' he exclaimed, 'I must be present at this accursed performance. I beg you to consider me in this.'

'Charles,' she repeated calmly, 'before I knew you would be here, I accepted Mr. Sondes's invitation—and with delight. It will be a unique occasion.'

'Do you then suggest that I do not go?'

'Of course not. I would not be so unreasonable—and

neither must you.' For the first time he was aware of that sprightly poise by which Mrs. Betterton-Best was now most easily recognized—the mask he had helped to fashion, with no trace of Rhoda herself.

'Then I must absent myself,' he retorted, as they rose to go, 'with a diplomatic chill.'

'What nonsense,' she said, and with a merry nod left him. He might, he felt, have been any ordinary acquaintance, and at last his reaction was that of a Frenchman. Was it possible she was cooling? Who was this fellow Sondes? What was the explanation of this highly polished manner behind which his tender Rhoda was now lost?

At that moment, his earlier Rhoda, with the light of battle in her eyes was hastening to Jean Worth. Her London gown was no longer equal to this event and time was running out—but it was just possible that M. Jean would rise to the occasion for her. She knew exactly what she wanted, and it was one of his little jokes that there was a dress designer lost in her . . . The dress would be of a simplicity, in his classical white, and she must be utterly unlike any other woman in that theatre—but there was not a moment to lose!

On that night of nights, none would have guessed that she was now twenty-eight years of age. She looked taller than usual in slim, tight-fitting white velvet, with her burnished hair brushed back from her bland brow, in contrast to every other woman's. She had the air of some angelic *ingénue*, for the seductive décolletage of the gown was much less daring than that usually favoured by the so unsubtle British matron. She carried in her white gloved hand one magnificent ostrich feather as a fan, the fronds of which at one moment veiled an exquisite bosom, and at others absently revealed this, and the fact that she wore no jewels. Her smile was perhaps a trifle shy, her youthful charm frosted by the touch of ceremony that befitted the occasion. A swan amid a flaunting of peacocks, she drew and held each gaze in, apparently, all innocence. Every lorgnette and opera-glass was levelled upon her—

It was, in short, the night of her life, and Hugh Sondes, who had already discovered her actual age, realized with growing dismay that he, some ten years older, had at last

fallen finally in love with a chameleon—or witch, call her what he liked.

The Prince, seated between two of the dullest dowagers in Europe, in one of the royal boxes, could not take his gaze from her—but not once did this decorous dream of delight raise her eyes to his. Nor did he guess that she was well aware of his every movement from that oblique vision common to most women.

Next morning the following letter reached her:

You were the only beautiful woman there, but I detest your distinguished companion. If you still value my peace of mind, go home as soon as possible, Charles.

Some hours later this note reached him:

My luggage was already packed, and I am now en route for heaven. . . .

It was their last quarrel. Periods of separation varied and were keenly felt—but nothing else occurred to disturb either of them. Their devotion increased, and separation kept passion constant.

But throughout Rhoda had her own difficulties. Among these was the fact that although financial anxiety may prove a serious drawback to an artist, so too may luxury. This she did not discover until it was regrettably late. In those important early years her energies were expended on various delights—and the fiery element in her nature lulled. The circumspection dominating her days acted as a further brake. The Prince did not approve of her classes at the Slade. "These will lead to complications. Students will fall in love with you—possibly your tutors. I shall never have a moment's ease."

So Rhoda went to private classes at the Chiswick studio of a gifted spinster who grudged every hour spent on her pupil. She could make nothing of this sedate Mrs. Betterton-Best, who seemed to have missed some vital phase of girlhood, and whose work revealed nothing but a misplaced persistence.

Strangely enough, on their last summer afternoon together, the Prince had touched indirectly on this very difficulty.

They were resting on the balcony outside Rhoda's bedroom, after a day of such intense sunshine that the garden tingled with heat beyond the shade . . . a day dimmed only by the certainty that he must leave that night for Italy.

'I shall never forget the early hours of this morning,' she said dreamily. 'Half past four, wasn't it, and there was the moon dissolving like a hot sixpence in the vast cool sky, and in the stillness that continuous cuckoo call . . . a pale summer morning that would become a perfect day.'

'Such sensitivity,' he exclaimed, 'and yet how practical you are! You can immerse yourself in loveliness, and yet emerge alert.'

She smiled faintly. He could not say: and yet emerge creative!

Oblivious he continued: 'It is of course the sign of the goddess—Proserpina awakening!'

Swiftly she said, 'All thanks to you, who make my summer constant.'

Unexpectedly he sighed. 'If I've rescued you from some of Pluto's rigours, I may also have deprived you of the strength to resist these.'

Reproachfully she said, 'I thought we were agreed that his kingdom is not the final one?'

'True. But it is certainly important that we know how to deal with the dark in its turn.'

Softly she said, 'I shall remember.'

'Adorable!' he kissed her hand, 'then we awake together.'

'Charles,' she said suddenly, 'you do believe this, don't you? You are not simply comforting me?'

'What is a tryst but a trust?' he replied. 'As a Platonist, I vow that our next meeting already awaits us—in that celestial region of the Idea, once we have regained this! There of course we shall encounter each other again, when the equinoctial winds of time have blown themselves out—in the original halcyon between spring and summer!'

'And where,' she prompted, 'there is no marriage, or giving in marriage—how wonderful that will be!'

More grimly than was usual with him he replied, 'Worth waiting for, dear heart. . . .'

Four weeks later, at the same hour, she was seated downstairs when the inconceivable happened.

It had been a sultry, unsatisfactory afternoon as hourly she had expected a telegram from him. Three days had passed without a message—a most unusual occurrence. Through the open window, she would be the first to hear the telegraph boy approach, the bell ring—and then Marco would appear, beaming with the salver. . . .

At that very moment, she heard the messenger arrive, the bell ring—but Marco did not appear.

Apparently it was only the evening paper—Marco would be glancing at the racing results. He was an inveterate gambler. It was his only weakness—

And then about ten minutes later, Marco had appeared. To her astonishment, he held a small glass of brandy in his hand. There was no salver—and his face was ashen. In his other hand he carried the newspaper.

As he stood there, looking at her, she felt herself grow cold from the feet up. She was incapable of speech. She could only stare at him, frozen in her fear, dying by inches.

Slowly he advanced, and held out the glass of brandy to her. Harshly he said:

‘Drink this first.’

Then she knew. She ceased to die of fear.

Half dead, dumb, she took the brandy and swallowed it.

Inflexibly Marco said, ‘No survivors. A hurricane struck the yacht. I will come back in a few minutes. . . .’

And he left her with the head-lines.

Later that evening she had stared out of the window into the July garden with incredulity a being from another world, trapped in trivial unreality.

Then, nervelessly, she began to walk from room to room of the silent house, but it was characteristic of her that now she could congratulate herself that none of her acquaintances knew. She would not have to face sympathy, confirming with each word the fearful truth. Mr. Betterton-Best’s death would be announced very much later—when she was abroad somewhere . . . so that there could be no link with the Prince.

Finally she made her way on to the balcony, and sat down.

Interspersed with blank intervals, thoughts continued to present themselves—

Death had come before its time. It was life's unforeseen betrayal. This was what it amounted to—what everything had deliberately led up to: an unspeakable sorrow. And she could not convert this, like other misfortunes, to a tolerable endurance. It would have to change her, if she were to survive.

And as she continued to sit on their balcony in the same stoic silence the long summer twilight deepened until, from the garden below, night rose around her conclusively. . . .

Within a week she called on her solicitors, Messrs. Cadogan Coutts and Vyse, for the strain of going through the London day as if all were as usual was proving insupportable.

But Mr. Vyse was emphatic on this point.

'Your discretion has never failed Prince Vicenza yet, and I'm sure it will not now. Your South American cruise should not start for at least another month. . . .'

Mutely Mrs. Betterton-Best had followed his advice, which was no less than he had expected.

Three months after her departure, Marto explained Madame's continued absence to callers at the Villa by the news that Mr. Betterton-Best had died abroad. On her return she was calmer than her friends expected, but disinclined to talk—understandably enough. 'It had all been terribly sudden . . .'. But she looked so well that some considered her a trifle lacking in feeling. The only time that anyone had ever seen Mrs. Betterton-Best look ill was during the month before she sailed to join her husband—almost as if coming events had cast their shadow before them.

Mr. Vyse, however, was delighted with the improvement in her appearance. He also congratulated her on the dignity with which she had maintained throughout years an extremely delicate position—and he himself escorted her to the front door of his offices.

Privately he was reflecting that this irregular union had been conducted by both parties with as much propriety as any state alliance—which had simplified matters considerably for Cadogan Coutts and Vyse, to say nothing of Rocchia and Gaddi of Milan. He thoroughly approved of Mrs. Betterton-Best. She scarcely ever came to see him, and never interfered

with her investments. Year after year, her business dozed on with them, rewarding a minimum of effort with judicious gain—a most agreeable client.

But Mrs. Betterton-Best re-living it all again perceived now that it had been, as well, a very great strain. Those dangers that she had skirted—and escaped! If Charles had been a different man . . . above all, if there had been no early settlement!

At the start, she had barely given the settlement a thought. Charles had been her be-all and end-all. But long ago she had realized that the settlement had been salvation. And in all sincerity she thanked God for it every night of her life. Money was never mentioned, her gratitude ascended as thanks for her delectable Villa. The prayer was like a faithful receipt. It seemed to regularize the situation somewhat between her and heaven—especially as its incense had arisen for so many years now. . . .

She did not have to turn the bedside light on now to know that the night was wearing on to dawn. It had grown much cooler—with a damp chill on the air, an ultimate odour of earth. In the silence the subdued murmur of London had hardened slightly . . . night lorries passing at intervals along the great north road—

The sound summoned again those dismal childhood hours at Goods Station Road, lorries, vans, drays passing down that drab street endlessly . . . railway waggons shunting . . . sudden, unseen collisions

Then, as she waited, at last it came—the welcome clip-clop of a horse's hooves—the growler that had taken her with Aunt Ada to the station . . . to Italy. She was travelling nearer Charles every hour, every day, every year! Wonderful to dwell on that. . . .

The basket-carriages of San Remo with their ponies, jiggling along at toy speed between the parasols, the dazzling white façades and the sparkling sea—

Then the *carrozzellas* of Florence, and she and Charles have met, have known each other at a glance. . . .

Yet they had travelled together in a drosky; a *fiacre*; a sleigh with white Hungarian trotters and scarlet snow cloths, before they achieved that which had delighted them most—

the informal seclusion of an English hansom. A shining black glass slipper for theatre, ball, or banquet—or supper after midnight! The very name evoked romance . . . jingling merrily home through gas-lit London in the small hours of the morning. . . .

Mrs. Betterton-Best at last turned over on her side. It was almost daybreak. Another day. Her Edwardian overture had become a serenade from the past—was already a souvenir.

She meant to sleep. She was warding off the silence of outer space with the jingling of a hansom, and she knew it—that silence which held an echo of the sea pounding for ever on an unknown shore. But the hansom went on too, clip-clop, clip-clop, jingle, jingle . . . because as long as she lived, she would remember that as well.

And in the cool grey haze of morning, to the dawn chorus of sparrow and wren, she fell asleep, her face soaked with tears that she no longer knew.

12. Rendezvous in Regent's Park

1921 . . .

Mrs. Betterton-Best awoke late on the morning after Hugh Sondes had dined at the Villa with such devastating results. Awoke to find the hot water stone cold. She had forgotten that the boiler had also failed her. She was startled, too, by a request from Jessie Muntz for a private word with Madam—her husband had advised this.

Mr. Muntz, who had married her peerless parlour-maid, was a pharmacist at Chalk Farm with pronounced Left Wing views. Had he decided to end Jessie's part-time work? Mrs. Betterton-Best braced herself—

'Well, Madame, as you likely know, Mr. Marco never liked Emily Edge, and no more do I—never have—for she's no better than a common louse—'

Mrs. Betterton-Best flinched. Since marriage Jessie's vocabulary had become much more robust.

'And though, Madame, it demeans me to discuss her,' Jessie continued coldly, 'yet a louse should not be harboured. Not that I'm referring to her double-dealing with the rest of the staff and me, though she's as false as those teeth she smiles with. No, Madame, I'm referring to what concerns you—and that low-down information which should never have been given to Mr. Sondes last night at the front door—'

Mrs. Betterton-Best's eyes sharpened. 'Continue, Jessie.'

'Mr. Sondes arrived earlier than expected, and I caught Emily in the hall, hob-nobbing about our difficulties down-

stairs. Mrs. Ruddick handing in her notice, and the boiler failing. My husband says that Emily is an object of misplaced charity. That if she starts on the boiler to visitors, where will she stop?

'Where indeed! I'm much obliged to Mr. Muntz.'

'Not at all, Madam. Right is right, he says.'

This from the Left Wing was certainly handsome. Crisply Mrs. Betterton-Best said:

'Give Emily a month's salary today in lieu of notice. Send her home in a taxi—with that hideous pansy tea-set from the last bazaar, the one she greatly admires. I do not mean to see her again.'

'Very good, Madam. And the cook's compliments—Miss Nevill is so disgusted with the way Mrs. Ruddick has also let you down that she's willing to stretch a point, and sleep here steady for the next month. So at least, Madam, you can count on your breakfast till the new butler arrives. . . .'

Mrs. Betterton-Best scarcely heard her. She was engrossed by the duplicity of last night's dinner guest. Hugh Sondes was not after all gifted with clairvoyance. He was simply guilty of connivance with misfortune. He had not knocked his hostess sideways in a moment of mystic despair—he had deliberately hit her when she was down. It was an outrage. . . .

On her way to the registry office, in a taxi, all her dissatisfaction with the past twenty years suddenly boiled up. She longed to tell everyone to go to the devil—starting with Hugh. She found she was shaking with anger. Why pretend that this was due to present domestic problems? She was sick to death of the whole unexamined predicament of her life—

Those exhausting efforts that she had made for twenty years to be poised, pleasant, accommodating to practically everyone . . . it was beyond endurance. And she was impatient by nature too. But now she'd had enough. Hugh was simply the last straw. She would revert. Become natural. Please herself. And those who didn't like it, could do the other thing!

Leaving the registry office, after another fruitless visit, she felt only a surprising zest. 'This was how life should feel! Yes, she recognized this state of mind. It belonged intimately

to her. How had she ever grown apart from it? It was freedom. At what stage had it left her? How could she ever have lost such a precious possession?

She walked on—searching at all costs for the truth. So much happiness hung on this—her true being.

Had ease helped to blunt perception?

She would take a 'bus, instead of the usual taxi—

The 'bus was rather full, and bumped along uncomfortably. There was an odd smell of soot . . . It brought back Goods Station Road in a sturdy, endearing way she had not hitherto enjoyed.

And then she saw the sweep opposite, a small, wiry man. He looked away hurriedly as he caught her eye, and then dropped his gaze, humbled by his own appearance. His face and hands had been hastily wiped, but were not yet washed, and his shoulders still sparkled with diamond jet. A dirty bandage bundled his thumb. His expression was both resigned and charitable.

God, she thought suddenly, what have I become?

The pang the sweep cost her was almost insupportable. She had a swift, passionate desire to benefit him at all costs.

But at that instant he got up to go. She had not a minute to lose—

She rose too, and jumped out after him. She had to hurry, for the sweep's trudging gait covered ground with surprising speed—

Breathless, she touched his elbow, 'Forgive me, please—' The man's astonishment reminded her that sympathy could be an insult.

Wildly she improvised, 'It's, it's such a pleasure to see a sweep! I have a house with a great many chimneys . . . If you could let me have the name of your firm?'

His face brightened. 'I work for myself, ma'am. The name is Gatty—Adam Gatty.'

'Oh,' she hesitated, 'I suppose you could give the usual references?'

'Well, yes, ma'am. I daresay Mr. Pryce the Vicar of St. Luke's would speak for me . . . my wife and me live at the cross, Camden Town. Most folk round there know us.'

But Mrs. Betterton-Best had forgotten both charity and

chimneys. She had suddenly remembered the boiler and her own dire need—

'Mr. Gatty,' she said firmly, 'I will telephone the Vicar today. My home is no distance from yours. Here is my card. As tomorrow is Saturday, perhaps you and your wife might call in the evening about six o'clock—to see the place, and have a little chat about the future?' . . .

By Monday Mrs. Gatty was installed as daily cleaner at the Villa, the best and most silent it had yet known. Mr Gatty, an equally mute treasure, had arranged to clean the boiler once a week without fail.

'I really am the luckiest—' Mrs. Betterton-Best checked the boast.

She had still to find a butler who would stoke.

Into the bargain, she had just received a note from Hugh Sondes that was nothing short of insult. He had thanked her for a delicious dinner, and one of the most enjoyable evenings he could remember. . . .

One week later she left the registry office in Baker Street for the last time. Today's offering had teeth that did not fit and an equally off-hand manner. He had refused to consider the boiler—

'I no longer despair,' she told herself. 'I am now desperate.'

She decided to walk home by Clarence Gate, and entered Regent's Park shortly after Mr. Ellis had seated himself on his special seat there.

The satisfaction Mrs. Betterton-Best usually derived from comparing her azaleas with those of the public beds failed her today. It was too hot. The scent of the hawthorn was almost over-powering. She decided to cool off . . . but most of the park seats were occupied on this heatwave morning—

She entered the sun-dappled shade of the Broad Walk, and without a moment's hesitation sat down on Mr. Ellis's seat—he looked quiet, well-dressed, reserved.

Mr. Ellis, who had been on the point of leaving, reflected that it would look rather pointed if he rose at once. This elegant lady appeared to have materialized out of the ground—

She gave him a polite, unsmiling bow—an acknowledgment of his presence and no more— and once seated, looked away.

Mr. Ellis was reassured.

In that brief bow Mrs. Betterton-Best decided that Mr. Ellis was a bank manager. Probity in a Homburg. Those formidable spectacles too . . . But why wasn't he at his bank at this hour? Perhaps on holiday . . . He carried no gloves, but was exceptionally well-shod.

As Mr. Ellis's shoes were invariably selected and supplied by Mr. Hislop, Mrs. Betterton-Best had no idea that her clues went for nothing, and that she was sitting beside a man dressed from head to foot by other people.

A few minutes passed peacefully, and Mr. Ellis was again about to rise when the lady said pleasantly:

'Almost too hot, isn't it? For problems anyway—

Mr. Ellis, startled, turned his sober face towards her.

'I was thinking of my servant problem,' she said hastily. 'In a heat-wave the chase has no charm. I've been searching for a suitable butler for over two months—'

'Is that so,' Mr. Ellis said carefully. 'I did not know there was a shortage of such.'

'Neither did I. My last one died in March, after twenty years service with me. In that time a revolution seems to have taken place in this country. The people who have been interviewing *me* are almost another form of evolution.'

Mr. Ellis laughed briefly. 'I daresay.' He had met a number of society women at Franklyn Frobisher and Steel's offices. This one was slightly different. He could not put his finger on the variance, but it existed —

'Why not have a word with your solicitor?' he suggested. 'Sometimes in the winding-up of an estate, there are reliable servants who would be glad to know of a suitable situation. I don't say it happens often—but I've known a number of cases where such an arrangement has been made.'

'That's an inspiration!' Mrs. Betterton-Best favoured him with her sprightly smile. 'I'll get in touch with Cadogan Coutts and Vyse at once. I'm devoted to Mr. Vyse—he's so exactly like Mr. Tack the Tailor out of Happy Families!'

Mr. Ellis was chilled by this frivolity—Cadogan Coutts and Vyse were the *ne plus ultra* in legal practice. So careful were they of the type of case they handled that their clients were wont to enter the box in an aura of conscious rectitude, which

rarely failed to impress both judge and jury. Franklyn Frobisher and Steel were to Cadogan Coutts and Vyse as the Commons to the Lords . . .

'I thought you were a banker,' the irreverent lady continued, 'but now of course I see you are a lawyer. The Scots are born lawyers.'

Somewhat bleakly Mr. Ellis said, 'I am the managing-clerk of Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel, Stone Buildings.'

'But how delightful,' Mrs. Betterton-Best exclaimed. 'I know Mr. Frobisher well. He and I have exhibited pictures at the same gallery. In fact, I tried to buy his painting of Rheims Cathedral—but he wouldn't sell.'

'It's hanging in the office,' Mr. Ellis told her. 'He's been a changed man since he took to painting eight years ago.'

'No wonder—what a success he's had! Painting can become a passion.'

'Mphm,' Mr. Ellis observed.

'That's another reason why I'm desperate at present. I long to be back in my studio. A new technique occurred to me this morning . . . how I detest this waste of time—'

'While on the subject of Mr. Frobisher,' Mr. Ellis said sombrely, 'I should state that I am no longer managing-clerk at their London office. I left last Monday. They have asked me to take up the same position at their Speldarch Waters office in September.'

'Speldarch Waters,' she echoed, 'that's a big change from London. Is your wife pleased?'

'I'm a bachelor,' Mr. Ellis said.

'Oh,' Mrs. Betterton-Best replied—he looked much more like a widower.

'But I'm none too pleased myself,' Mr. Ellis added. 'However, there it is—one must move with the times . . . make way for others.'

She cast a quick glance at him. She liked his Highland dignity. She sensed that he too had recently known humiliation. 'Have you been long at the London office?'

'Thirty-five years. I went there as a lad. Mr. Steel was the partner I knew best. He retired last Monday, so it's probably all for the best.'

Impulsively she said: 'Wouldn't you rather retire too?'

Mr. Ellis was shocked. It was like being told to prepare for death while still in perfect health. 'I wouldn't think of it. My work is my interest. *My* problem is killing time till it starts again.'

'But think of all the fascinating things you can do meantime—places abroad . . .'

'When there's so many, you want none,' he told her. 'No, I realized this morning that I might do worse than stay where I am. And get to know London at leisure.'

She nodded. 'I know what you mean. One is usually so busy travelling—one may miss the fact that one has arrived!'

As she chatted on, Mr. Ellis continued to study her, as he would a client—listening carefully, and occasionally glancing at her. He could not quite make her out. Poised, yet precipitate—the smile a bit too sweet. She reminded him of the Dresden shepherdess that once stood on the parlour chimneypiece at Croft Knock. His grandmother's dry, lined face used to grow tender when she looked at this figure. Later, a neighbour had dropped it on the stone hearth. All but the small sweet face had been smashed. When he consoled, his grandmother had sighed: 'Aye, it's a pity—but it doesn't do to mak' objects idols.'

Glancing away from Mrs. Betterton-Best, Mr. Ellis received an irrelevant but convincing impression that the lady beside him had been an idol. This although he now saw that she was older than he had first thought.

'About this butler of yours,' he said, 'could you not make do with one from the registry office until Mr. Vyse can find you a better?'

'But *they* won't make do with me,' she protested. 'That's the whole point. I have an excellent staff of three women, yet although I seldom entertain at home now, I cannot find a butler who is willing to stoke the hot-water furnace night and morning.'

'Dear me,' Mr. Ellis shook his head, 'that's bad.'

'It's frightful. Only one man agreed to do this—Lord Brompton's butler—but when he arrived at the Villa, in the Park here, and saw that he would have to sleep on the ground floor, he was terrified, and refused to come. Burglars I suppose. But Marco, our first and only major-domo always slept on the

ground floor. He had a delightful little suite—bedroom, sitting-room, bathroom. He was so proud of it—and we were very proud of Marco! He had been with us since our honeymoon, and after Mr. Betterton-Best's death ten years ago, he waited on until his own end last March. In all Marco's twenty years of service, he never once complained, and stoked the boiler as a matter of course. It's been quite a shock to discover how men have changed.'

'I daresay,' Mr. Ellis observed again, 'but it doesn't do to lose heart. Patience is sometimes needed.'

She found his manner soothing, as F.F. and S's clients had always done. He gave off an atmosphere of cool, level light—the light of early morning, she decided. Sanity, sobriety, strength.

'Have you a bit of a garden?' he inquired.

'Quite a bit,' she admitted, 'but that's under control. The only drawback is the boiler. My women can't deal with it, and men won't. In fact—'

She turned on the seat, lowered her voice, and said impressively, 'Things have reached such a pitch that a friend, a so-called friend, has actually suggested that I give up my home, my home, mark you, and move into an hotel. *An hotel!* I can assure you, Mr. —'

'Ellis,' he informed her.

'I can assure you, Mr. Ellis, that rather than leave my home and go into a hotel, I would sooner die—'

She turned away her head, and abruptly added, 'almost.'

This amendment had a peculiar effect on Mr. Ellis.

He thought for a second. Then he said: 'It's best to be business-like, so if you should feel so inclined, after mature reflection, I can give you Mr. Steel's name and private address as reference. You can think it over—'

'Mr. Steel? What reference?' she asked astonished.

'Well, now,' he said with his usual idiocy, 'perhaps I can be of some help, for a week or two—with that boiler. . . .'

13. Venetian Assignment

A few days later Mr. Ellis informed Mr. Muspratt at Cholmondeley Chambers that he was spending his holiday this summer at the house of a London acquaintance.

Mr. Muspratt on reading 'care of Mrs. Betterton-Best' had a gloomy conviction that this was the widow foretold by Mr. Wotherspoon.

To Mr. Simms and the Hislops, Mr. Ellis gave the same information—merely adding to them that he might be giving his hostess a hand with her correspondence and other matters. His three friends at once concluded that this was a client introduced by his firm. It was not Mr. Ellis's way to offer explanations.

The Villa, on his first visit of inspection, had staggered him, but he was still more amazed by himself. Yet he now felt vindicated. He was about to take a most unusual step—and at an age when one did not expect this. It was not, he knew, the behaviour of a man dominated by prunes on Thursday. Apart from those second thoughts that dog all heroic enterprise, he felt nothing but a refreshing sense of freedom. With Mrs. Betterton-Best, moreover, he would be safe. As a Scot he subscribed to no class distinction, but in the hierarchies of created being he knew that spheres differed—fortunately. Unlike the widows and spinsters of Croydon and Kentish Town this lady could never have any predatory interest in him. And what else had a man to fear?

Mrs. Betterton-Best's explanation of Mr. Ellis to her staff was almost as brief as his. All they knew was that a family friend, a legal gentleman, was arriving to help Madam with her correspondence and other matters. He had most kindly offered to keep an eye on the boiler—and wished to occupy Mr. Marco's suite during his stay. He would dine with Madam on such nights as she was at home, but his other meals would be served in his own sitting-room—to ensure quiet for his studies.

'Mr. Ellis,' his hostess had said on that first visit of inspection, 'as you said in the Park, we must be business-like. Money can never repay kindness, yet there must be a salary.'

'Mrs. Betterton-Best,' his gentle smile was also firm, 'then there must be board and lodging paid to you.'

She laughed. 'You win! But I'm almost horrified at my own presumption. To let you stoke that furnace— It's like asking Rembrandt to paint the pantry. . . .'

Yet, as she was soon to find, how easily he fitted in, how smoothly their arrangements worked, and on the whole how seldom they met! It could not have been more satisfactory. The servants from the start conceived the highest regard for him. In any case of difficulty, he was at once asked to arbitrate. In the early mornings he went about in his alpaca jacket, putting this and that to rights. Later in the day he took over her correspondence. The gardeners soon ceased to mistrust him. He kept out of the greenhouses, and during June staked ably and unobtrusively. Once more the Villa ran like clock-work.

She got back into her studio—fired with energy and relief. It was years since she had had such a fund of enthusiasm.

By mid-June she had decided: He mustn't spend the rest of his life asleep in a place like Speldarch Waters. No, he must accept a salary, and remain here. But I'll force nothing at present. The Villa will exert its own spell, and all my troubles will be at an end.

She was delighted that Mr. Simms should visit the Villa. Why not others from Cholmondeley Chambers—they would enjoy the garden? But Mr. Ellis quite firmly desired only Horace and the Hislops at present.

All three friends were stunned by Mr. Ellis's translation to paradise.

Mr. Simms was the first to come, and Mr. Ellis was gratified

by Mrs. Betterton-Best's appreciation of him. She urged Horace to come any afternoon or evening. 'If you don't want to see Mr. Ellis—look on this particular summer-house as your own. Enjoy the garden. You'll be undisturbed. We'll leave iced coffee for you in a thermos-jug—and the daily papers.'

Shyly and slowly Mr. Simms made a habit of this. The garden was no distance from Cholmondeley Chambers. He had not had a holiday for years, and this enchanting garden was another Eden. His rheumatism lessened—

Back at Cholmondeley Chambers he expatiated on Mr. Ellis's suite and the high quality of the food with which he was regaled—in a vain attempt to keep his interrogators off the subject of Mrs. Betterton-Best. The Chums had become increasingly anxious lest Mr. Ellis did not play his cards properly. Marriage alone would secure his present advantages. And why not, Cholmondeley Chambers wished to know? Mr. Simms looked so unhappy at this point that pressure was applied. Shaking his head, Mr. Simms with the insight of innocence admitted that he didn't think Mrs. Betterton-Best would ever marry anyone—unless perhaps royalty.

From that moment Mrs. Betterton-Best was written off as an arrant snob, although she continued to be the subject of acid speculation.

Even Mr. Hislop, who had met Mrs. Betterton-Best more briefly than Horace, was dazzled by Mr. Ellis's prospects.

'Never!' Hetty told him. 'That lady is wedded to herself—and James is not the marrying sort. He is too romantic.'

Mr. Hislop was incredulous, 'James romantic?'

'Yes. You yourself told me that the only photograph in his bedroom was of that girl—his mother, who died when he was six. That's as far as James will ever get with any woman now.'

But at the Villa all was concord and detachment. Mr. Ellis had no anxieties on his own account, and only one on Mrs. Betterton-Best's—he hoped that she was adequately insured. The contents of the house troubled him, for as a rule women through ignorance, or parsimony, cut down on this vital outlay. Policies, moreover, should be regularly reviewed—but of course it was none of his business. She had, however, asked him to catalogue Mr. Betterton-Best's library, and revealed no idea of its value. It was quite a small library, but the editions

were notable, and in some cases rare. There were also a surprising number of Italian folios that Mr. Ellis suspected were costly. Mr. Betterton-Best's interest in geology and astronomy impressed Mr. Ellis, it was similar to his own. There were volumes here that he himself had never expected to handle—and read.

His pleasant silent evenings with these books recalled that text last heard in Church: *Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thy habitations . . .* He was thoroughly enjoying his holiday.

Almost the last book to catalogue was a photograph album which he found hidden away at the back of one of the shelves. This contained some unmounted photographs which Mr. Betterton-Best had not had the energy to paste in. These photographs were all of the same man—presumably Mr. Betterton-Best himself, from the resemblance to the larger studies in the drawing-room.

Mr. Ellis decided to index this volume as Photographs (miscellaneous). These were not numerous, but revealed Mr. Betterton-Best at a much earlier date in various fancy-dress uniforms. He had evidently been a dancing-man. No expense had been spared on these costumes. The photograph that interested Mr. Ellis most was the earliest one. It showed Mr. Betterton-Best at the age of twenty, or so, in a turban—a Turkish costume. It was the only one in which he was smiling. There were two copies of this photograph—evidently it had been a favourite. Or perhaps the person for whom it was intended had not claimed it—?

Mr. Ellis closed the album, and replaced it where he had found it. . . .

By the end of June, calmed and restored, Mrs. Betterton-Best, who was daily seeing less of everyone in the house, Mr. Ellis included, had once more decided that God was good.

Next morning the letter arrived.

She recognized the envelope at once. It was from Cadogan Coutts and Vyse. Before opening it, she wondered why on earth Mr. Vyse should write her at present, for she had not yet sounded him about a butler as Mr. Ellis believed—

To her surprise, the letter was not typed. Mr. Vyse had written it. It proved to be short and very direct. Mr. Vyse was

anxious to see her at once on a matter of importance. If she could not call on him, he would call upon her. He asked her to telephone as soon as possible.

For some absurd reason Mrs. Betterton-Best's heart sank. She had an ominous conviction that this summons concerned Italy. Yet why? At this belated date it could not be the Princess on the warpath, for she had died some years ago—and no one else there was directly or indirectly involved. But Italy was the warning this bell rang.

At noon she was announced to Mr. Vyse.

He was one of those small, wiry men who never seem to age. He ate and drank abstemiously, took no exercise, and spent every hour he could at Crockford's. It was almost a decade since she had seen him, and he had altered so little that she had a disconcerting impression that the clock had been put back to earlier predicament.

'A letter from Rocchia and Gaddi at Milan is the reason of my haste,' he began. 'Prince Vicenza's sister, the dowager Duchess of Zollfeld and Veit urgently needs your help—' he stopped short, his client was staring at him astounded.

'My help?'

'You have met the Duchess?'

'Never. All I know of her is that she was fourteen years older than Prince Vicenza, and that he was particularly anxious that we never met. She was his half-sister and, I understood, a difficult personality. He was much fonder of her daughter who married a professor at the Sorbonne, against the Duchess's wishes. I know none of the Prince's relations. I can't conceive how I could possibly be of any help to the Duchess.'

Mr. Vyse hesitated for a second. 'She has certainly been placed in an embarrassing position. Her solicitors have written at considerable length. It is one of those absurd situations that do arise in legal experience from time to time' -- he seemed to have difficulty in coming to the point.

'Briefly, a Mr. Caesar Pardo and his two servants have been living in a suite at one of Monte Carlo's luxe hotels for some time. Not only does this ex-gentleman bear a remarkable resemblance to Prince Vicenza but servants at the hotel have circulated the rumour that he is indeed the Prince travelling incognito—'

Mrs. Betterton-Best gave an indignant gasp, and Mr. Vyse continued:

'Certain newspapers abroad have already published paragraphs touching lightly on this fantasy, and again recounting the Prince's hurricane death at sea in 1912 when that yacht was lost. Newspaper nonsense like this is invariably ignored by important persons, but it is of peculiar annoyance to the Duchess and her family at present, for it appears that her son, Prince Vicenza's heir, is having a difficult time with the workers in their mines there. Demands that Prince Vicenza should return from Monaco have actually been painted across the walls of the Duke's palace in Tuscany. I understand that Mr. Pardo has ignored an invitation to refute these rumours—'

'What impertinence! He must have some sort of grudge against the family. Impostors usually want money, but you say the man is living in luxury? He can't be short of cash.'

'Impostors often want money, but there can, of course, be other motives. At any rate the Duchess and her family are uneasy. But they are so well known in Monaco that were they to visit Monte Carlo themselves, for the purpose of viewing this Mr. Pardo, it would naturally cause more talk. Nor do they wish to enlist the help of an ordinary friend in this delicate task. The Duchess is anxious for the help of a close associate—one who knew the Prince better than most people.'

'Quite,' Mrs. Betterton-Best said dryly.

'She asks you to go out there, to inspect privately, and confirm that the story is rubbish—and in advance she expresses her gratitude for this favour in a most handsome fashion.'

'What a confounded nuisance,' Mrs. Betterton-Best muttered.

'All expenses will be defrayed through Rocchia and Gaddi,' Mr. Vyse continued, 'and they add that should it prove necessary for you to visit the Duchess at Venice, your previous undertaking not to visit Italy will be abrogated.'

'Oh, it will, will it? Well, Mr. Vyse, I have no intention of visiting Venice. I have already been warned by a well-informed friend that Italy will not be a healthy place for any of us this year.'

Mr. Vyse looked up sharply. 'That's interesting. And if you do decide to help her by going to Monte Carlo, I would

certainly advise you to take your secretary, or some reliable friend.'

'I never travel abroad alone,' Mrs. Betterton-Best said, calmly. 'The Prince always insisted that Marco or a courier went with me.'

'Indeed?' again Mr. Vyse hesitated for a second. 'I imagine you will have little more to do than to glance at this Mr. Pardo once or twice in the restaurant—'

'If,' Mrs. Betterton-Best inserted, 'this Mr. Pardo comes out of his suite to dine.'

'True,' Mr. Vyse frowned. 'Yes, it may take a little time to catch a glimpse—'

'And perhaps some ingenuity!'

'Oh, I don't think the man's concealing himself,' Mr. Vyse said quickly. 'A reporter actually secured a photograph of him on the hotel terrace. In fact, it was this newspaper photograph that sparked off the outburst.'

'Have they sent a copy of the photograph?'

'No. The resemblance is, apparently, undeniable, but what the Duchess and her family want is a first-hand confirmation by one who is not a relative that the rumour is nonsense.'

Impatiently Mrs. Betterton-Best exclaimed, 'I can't even believe in this resemblance. Prince Vicenza was unique, in appearance as in everything.'

'Quite,' Mr. Vyse bowed. 'That is the position then. The ducal attorneys have enclosed a letter for you from the Duchess—' He handed this to her.

The letter was written in stilted English, but despite its formality a very human anxiety was plain, as well as a dignified appreciation of this favour requested. The letter ended with the hope that if Mrs. Betterton-Best graciously acceded to this, she would visit the Duchess at Venice before returning to England. It was signed Augusta Romano Louise of Zollfeld and Veit.

'Well?' queried Mr. Vyse.

'I'll go—it can't have been easy to send this request. In any case, I should always wish to render his family any help I could—' she paused. 'But I certainly never foresaw a day when this would be possible. I'll go,' she repeated, 'to Monte Carlo. Venice is out of the question.'

Mr. Vyse smiled. He did not readily form a high opinion of anyone, but his client had again justified this. 'I felt pretty certain you would help them. Now, I suggest that you spend a little time here, going over those papers quietly by yourself. Rocchia and Gaddi are anxious for obvious reasons that you leave for Monte Carlo as soon as possible. Nothing is known of this Mr. Pardo. His hotel has not been helpful—understandably. He is apparently a rich, well-conducted client. Then too, as you will remember, passports are not needed in Monaco. Its frontiers are controlled by France not Italy. Rocchia and Gaddi have been unable to discover whence this gentleman derives.' He passed a sheaf of papers to Mrs. Betterton-Best.

'How does Mr. Pardo spell his name?'

Mr. Vyse spelled it aloud. 'It is scarcely uncommon.'

'It is the name of a river,' she said suddenly, 'I remember that now. A river in South America—odd . . .'

After leaving Mr. Vyse she walked absently along the street. She felt thankful that her earlier anxiety had not been justified. She still could not account for that morbid alarm. This visit to Monte Carlo was tiresome in the extreme—but it was a duty, and the sooner it was over and done with the better.

She felt sorry for the Duchess and her family in this contretemps, but it really was an extraordinary volte-face on the part of fate that the Duchess, of all people, should now have to enlist her help!

Mrs. Betterton-Best was astonished by this aspect of the case that at first she could think of nothing else—revolving with the fact in a slow continuous waltz which suddenly turned out to be a kind of Paul Jones, as abruptly another had cut in—the impostor. For the first time she dwelt on him specifically—on his provocative silence . . . or was it a dignified disregard?

Sixty seconds later she had decided that the rumour itself was one of those gossip items blown up by newspapers around notable people—an impudent carnival balloon, a bomb-shell of hot air.

Her pace slackened slightly—she had only just realized that she would have to tell Mr. Ellis the truth about the Prince. That was a pity, but it couldn't be helped. After all, solicitors were accustomed to difficult situations, strange events. She would tell him at once and get it over. . . .

Mr. Ellis was certainly surprised, although he concealed this. Yet scarcely disconcerted. These peculiar situations were only too familiar in legal practice, together with their searching consequences.

'As you are kind enough to accompany me,' Mrs. Betterton-Best concluded, 'I shall have to close the Villa. It is the only step that causes me any anxiety, but Jessie can no longer remain overnight as in the past.'

Promptly Mr. Ellis said: 'I'm sure the Hislops would gladly act as caretakers. They only get away from home once every two years. This summer I know they'll be in London. It would certainly give them a great deal of pleasure—while you are abroad on business.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best was delighted. 'But what about the boiler? They'll be so uncomfortable without hot water.'

Dryly Mr. Ellis said: 'Hetty is a lass from Ettrick. She could stoke that furnace in her sleep. It will present no problem.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best felt both relieved and abject.

'And while Hetty is stoking,' Mr. Ellis added, 'Henry will play his oboe happily in one of your three summer-houses.'

This time Mrs. Betterton-Best felt gratified but guilty.

'So everyone will be satisfied,' Mr. Ellis ended peaceably.

'I do assure you,' his hostess said, 'that the Monte Carlo visit will be the last of it. I have no intention of going on to Venice—quite apart from the warning I had earlier this summer that Italy is no place for us at present.'

'Mphm,' Mr. Ellis observed.

She was surprised that he had made so little comment throughout, but relieved.

The arrangements for their departure went forward speedily. The Hislops were to arrive the night before and dine with Mrs. Betterton-Best then.

That morning Mr. Ellis asked Mrs. Betterton-Best if he might have a word with her about what he termed the Monte Carlo situation.

'Certainly,' but she was a trifle taken aback.

'I've given the matter further thought,' he told her, 'and I still can't understand why the Duchess has not sent a relative to observe that man.'

'Because they're too well known. It would cause more talk at Monte Carlo.'

'Might cause more talk,' he corrected her. 'It's clear they're highly nervous. This makes me wonder.'

'Wonder what?'

'Why they're so frightened of this rumour?'

'But Mr. Vyse made that quite plain—the gossip has reached their Tuscan miners. Any employers in that position would wish such an absurdity settled as soon as possible. An outsider's assurance is always more convincing.'

'No doubt,' Mr. Ellis observed, 'but it's always best to look both ways before crossing the road. I'm sorry to refer to the calamity itself, but I'm not clear on one or two points. Was it the Prince's own yacht?'

'No—and I don't believe the tragedy would have happened had it been his own. The one that sank was inferior. He was a guest—' Her voice was curt with the effort to control mounting emotion.

'And there were no survivors?' Mr. Ellis said.

'I have already told you that,' she said sharply. 'There were no survivors.'

'Just so,' he answered. This phrase as Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel knew did not express the unbelief of Mr. Ellis's mpm—it merely conveyed the Scots' verdict of not proven, and an alarming open-mindedness on the part of Mr. Ellis.

Coldly Mrs. Betterton-Best added: 'But wreckage from the yacht was later identified.'

Mr. Ellis bowed. 'It is to be hoped that Mr. Pardo will still be at Monte Carlo when you arrive.'

'Good heavens,' Mrs. Betterton-Best was exasperated, 'that never occurred to me!'

'If I might advise,' Mr. Ellis pursued, 'I would suggest that you do not mention this trip to any of your acquaintances. It's surprising how news travels.'

'You're quite right,' she exclaimed. 'And in any case we'll be back in no time—'

Abruptly she left him. Why had sober and satisfactory Mr. Ellis conjured these grotesque ideas just before travelling? Of course he had come fresh to the hurricane disaster—his

reaction was that of all inquirers at the time. Yet now she felt suffocated by impatience—

For months after the disaster, she had been the victim of crazy hopes and presentiments. She had known what those bereaved in the war meant when they said 'missing' was the most terrible word in any language. But a day came sooner or later when one knew that hope too was dead.

Mr. Ellis was a lawyer. He wished her to be ready for any contingency, but after the death of hope by hours, days, weeks and months, such speculations were an affront.

They were worse— Alone in her bedroom now she paled to the lips as she faced this monstrous possibility that Charles should still be alive and well and apart from her. Deliberately apart from her, after ten years' absence!

It was a blasphemy against the integrity of being, and the hope of heaven.

Suddenly, she felt she was short of air, yet had scarcely strength to reach the balcony—

There *were* worse things than death, and now she knew what one of them was. At the same time she was horrified to find that she could prefer Charles dead and loving to Charles alive and indifferent.

Such egoism made her—she realized—a sort of murderer . . . but it was the truth, and for one appalling moment she faced it fully, holding on to the balcony window for support.

It was an ordeal like no other she had known.

By the time I die, she thought as she pushed the window open, and sank on to the chaise-longue, there will be nothing left to go on . . . I had no idea I was so frightful. Nothing left but the truth—

For a minute or two, she lost consciousness as she lay there.

When she opened her eyes, the familiar balcony established her situation again. She felt at once weak yet acquiescent, and in this impressionable state a memory revived:

Charles had said that last summer afternoon together on this balcony: 'One must be able to deal with the dark—' and she had promised: 'I will remember.'

What was unknown Monte Carlo today but the dark?

She was still alive. Such as she was, she would have to go forward. . . .

That night before the Hislops fell asleep in their charming chintz guest-room at the Villa, its summer gloom faintly scented with phlox, Hetty remarked:

'Henry, I was wrong about Mrs. Betterton-Best—'

'You think she'll marry James yet?'

'Never in a thousand years!'

'What about her then?'

'Well, we were with her longer tonight. I sat nearer her. There's more to her than I thought. Yes . . . I think she's been through something, some time or other.'

'That's life,' Henry explained, 'it does you in. It's out to do this from the start. Middle-aged people are getting nearer the end. They ought to have a hobby, or an interest. Now, music—'

'Oh, go to sleep!' said Hetty. . . .

Towards dawn Rhoda began to dream. Once more she could hear the hollow roaring of breakers on a beach. That was all—the pounding sound in a pervading greyness. Yet she who could, in her heyday, dance until the small hours with cool hands and cheek always awoke from this nightmare to find sweat pouring from her. In the past she could not sit through Mendelssohn's Overture *Fingal's Cave*, as again the waves of music awoke this terror—

But now she was not so much dreaming as entering a recurring memory—she seemed to recognize the old nightmare at one remove . . . as a past experience. Through the familiar hollow roar in its pervading greyness, she knew that Charles was with her—standing unseen by her on this forsaken shore.

In the darkness of her bedroom she opened her eyes, restored. Then calmly fell asleep again. . . .

Next morning, as the boat-train was about to leave Victoria she had another surprise. All passengers were now aboard, and she and Mr. Ellis were seated in the *coupe* reserved for them. The platform remained rather crowded—more people than usual had come to see friends depart.

As the guard blew his whistle, suddenly she caught sight of Hugh Sondes. Hugh had not seen her, and had a woman hanging on his arm who was waving to some other window.

With quickened interest at the sight of this unexpected

woman, Rhoda leant forward. The woman turned—it was Millicent! She might have known. . . .

At that moment Hugh also turned, but unlike Millicent—he saw Rhoda . . . saw also Mr. Ellis in the act of handing over her passport.

With just the right amount of reserve, Rhoda bowed politely, and had the satisfaction of surprising Hugh's flash of astonishment. She felt relieved that Mr. Ellis was so presentable—

The train was moving out . . . Millicent had now seen her—and her face lit up spontaneously. This, Rhoda recognized, derived more from kindness than any pleasure the sight of her could possibly have afforded Hugh's sister.

Mr. Ellis could not understand why Mrs. Betterton-Best continued to grasp the passport without removing it from him.

'Oh! I'm sorry,' she smiled. 'I caught sight of two friends as the train moved out—such pleasant people!'

But her facile tone reproached her. She had never seen Hugh and Millicent so clearly before, and they were indeed pleasant people. Hugh, in his surprise, had remained uncovered longer than usual—she might have been a state funeral he was saluting!

As the train gathered speed she had an odd pang that had nothing to do with the past. For yet another and quite different reason she wished again that she were not leaving London on this outlandish errand.

14. Monte Carlo Encounter

Mr. Ellis had not previously travelled beyond Dieppe, and Monte Carlo's ornate splendour exceeded his imagination in a disturbing way.

Their hotel's marble terrace and be-flowered balconies could only be related by him to the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon. Its opulent interior compelled an automatic computation that left him oppressed. Its complex insurance problems also gave him pause—and the extravagance of the entire city appeared to be on the same grandiose scale.

His single bedroom on the fourth floor had a private bathroom with nickel-plated fittings; a porcelain bath; hot water towel rails; and an array of towels that would have impressed Mr. Pope of Pontings—for all were of the finest quality. Each time Mr. Ellis used a towel, it was freshly replaced by some invisible spectator who had brought this prodigal system to the pitch of clairvoyance.

At night across the sparkling scene in the restaurant, with its glitter of glass, its gleam of silver, the golden glow of each lamp-lit table, he saw Mrs. Betterton-Best's glance flash time and again to the pillared entrance; while the perfectly trained waiters soundlessly bestowed or withdrew rich fare in an atmosphere swift with the fragrance of wine, the perfume of flowers, and the heavier aroma of choice food. Music from a distant orchestra lent a subdued excitement to the scene, for the height of this huge room together with the sumptuous pile

of its carpet muted its visitors' voices to the hum of a hive.

He could detect the strain which Mrs. Betterton-Best was suffering, but she was a gay and gallant companion.

'I detest elaborate food,' she admitted, 'and now that I'm through with *Halibut Cleopatra*, I know only too well why Mark Anthony could not turn his mind to other things. This course has finished the rest of the meal for me.'

On their second evening she said quietly over coffee: 'I do not intend to spend the rest of summer in this hot-house. If we have neither seen nor heard anything of Mr. Pardo by to-morrow morning, I shall try a ruse.'

'It would certainly be a mistake,' Mr. Ellis agreed, 'to make a direct inquiry.'

'Have no fear! I shall think of something better. But what a pity that this house has no nice, open register that we all sign on arrival! That would certainly have simplified matters.'

'Just so,' Mr. Ellis replied, 'but it would also have put your name on the map!'

With a trace of irritation she exclaimed: 'That would scarcely matter. My name can mean nothing to that man. As it is—we don't even know if he is still here.'

Next day she told Mr. Ellis: 'In the slack period of the afternoon I notice that they have a younger lift-attendant on duty. Now, let us try this plan . . .'

That afternoon, accordingly, both entered the lift on the ground floor at a moment when no other guests were there.

'First floor,' Mr. Ellis said to the attendant in English.

'No,' Mrs. Betterton-Best interrupted, 'Mr. Pardo is on the third floor. That is so, isn't it?' she appealed to the attendant. 'Mr. Caesar Pardo's suite is on the third?'

'No, Madame,' he answered, 'Mr. Pardo's suite is on the second floor—'

Mrs. Betterton-Best looked very surprised, as the lift stopped. 'Has he changed his suite then?'

'No, Madame—he is still in number threee.'

'There you are!' she exclaimed to Mr. Ellis, 'I've confused the number of the suite with the floor—stupid of me! Thank you—' she gave the attendant a charming smile, as they stepped out.

'To the right, Madame,' he prompted, and shot up in his gilded cage to another summons.

Slowly Mrs. Betterton-Best and Mr. Ellis walked along the thickly carpeted, empty corridor which emanated at this hour the somnolence of *sicsta*.

One . . . two . . . three—these suites were spacious. There was nothing to distinguish Mr. Pardo's from his neighbours' except the number—but Mrs. Betterton-Best unhappily recognized it at a glance . . . four . . . five . . . six—

Turning to the right she and Mr. Ellis passed out of the corridor beneath an arch. They were now on the landing of the west stairway.

Walking upstairs they found themselves outside Mrs. Betterton-Best's smaller suite on the third floor—

'I'll wait here,' she said. 'You know what to say to the Reception Manager.'

Hurriedly she entered her own sitting-room, thankful to be alone. She had recognized suite three on the second floor as the one that she and the Prince had always had. The merest coincidence, of course, but it had momentarily unnerved her—the more so as it had made truth of the fabrication for the Reception Manager.

Ten minutes later Mr. Ellis was informing that gentleman that Mrs. Betterton-Best was rather disappointed in her present suite. At this hotel in the past she had enjoyed a balcony on the second floor—a balcony that extended to both bedroom and sitting-room. The suite that Mrs. Betterton-Best had always enjoyed in the past was suite three on the second floor. Was that available now?

The Reception Manager consulted his plan, but regretted that this suite was engaged for an indefinite period.

Mr. Ellis evinced concern. That was the side of the house that Mrs. Betterton-Best liked. Was suite four available?

It was the Reception Manager's turn to display disappointment. Suite four was also booked indefinitely. Suite two would be vacated by noon tomorrow, if Madame would care for that?

Mrs. Betterton-Best's spirits rose when she heard this news. 'Splendid,' she told Mr. Ellis, 'and suite two is actually better, for Mr. Pardo will have to pass my door to reach the lift. This

gives me a closer view of him—if I should see him leaving his suite. The balcony would, of course, give the best of all—but unless I see him standing on his, he remains invisible there. No one can be seen seated, or lying down from any adjacent one. I remember that distinctly. . . .’

She spent the whole of next afternoon, and the following morning lying out on her balcony—in vain. The balcony window of number three remained open, but only a servant came out once and removed something from a table—a small elderly man, presumably a valet. Next morning Mr. Pardo’s second servant, a tall blond man who resembled a Swedish masseur emerged, re-arranged the chaise-longue, or so she imagined—but nothing came of these preparations. Not once did she catch the sound of voices. Could Mr. Pardo be away—on some visit?

She had to admit her nerves were on edge. Anything would be better than this continued indecision—

No it wouldn’t—hastily she amended that.

The following afternoon she went on to the balcony later, and sat down in no amiable mood, with—as usual—a book open and unread before her.

Again time prolonged itself emptily, aimlessly. . . .

Gazing directly into the blue sky above the empty balcony beyond, she suddenly noticed a faint spiral of smoke ascending from it . . . a film so delicate that it appeared to be painted on the still air . . . and upon that instant she perceived the familiar aroma of a fine cigar—

Her heart lost a beat. Mr. Pardo was on his balcony after all. She had only to wait, and he would sooner or later arise. At last she had him! An intense anger was mounting in her with the peculiar odour of this cigar. Once more her patience was equal to this task. Yes, she could wait all afternoon, all evening if need be—for this ordeal would then be at an end. . . .

But she did not have to wait five minutes.

Still smoking his cigar, her fellow-guest arose, gazing over her unseen face into the cloudless blue—

Charles stood before her, tanned, taut with energy, the only touch of age his temples shining with silver—his eyes narrowed in this revelation of the sun . . . every lineament as she remembered it.

Confronting him, she arose—the sum of all vicissitudes surmounted stiffening her then, in this fearful crisis.

Wide-eyed she stared—and then he saw her, burnished with the same sunlight, and in the act of raising his cigar, he paused with astonishment at this vibrant face—

Her gaze, relentlessly focused on him, registered every detail—the white ash falling, the bright point of the cigar, the hand that held the cigar, the fingers that enclosed it—

It was a thick, heavy hand with fleshy fingers that had never belonged to Charles, that could never have belonged to Charles—

Her heart leapt in an agony of joy, her whole face flashed with triumph—she gave this stranger a bewildering, blinding smile, and plunged back into her room.

Mr. Pardo was left staring after her.

Never before had he had such an instantaneous success—such an undeniable conquest. . . .

It was an hour before Mrs. Betterton-Best recovered from her relief, and felt calm enough to send for Mr. Ellis.

As soon as he entered, she held out both hands to him with a candour he admired: 'All's well. I saw him on the balcony. The resemblance is remarkable. It took me in for one horrible minute. His eyes were screwed up in the sunshine—but when they're not they lack all Prince Vicenza's benignity.'

'But—' Mr. Ellis began.

'Don't worry!' she laughed. 'The Duchess will be delighted—I can testify on oath!'

'Mrs. Betterton-Best,' he said gravely, 'is it as near a thing as that? A difference in facial expression?'

She shook her head happily. 'Oh, dear no! Prince Vicenza had long narrow muscular hands, the finger bones clearly defined at each knuckle, every nail perfect. Mr. Pardo has a squat hand for his height, with fingers that are unusually fleshy at their tips—spatulate in fact.'

'I'm very glad to hear that,' Mr. Ellis said heartily.

'He saw me staring at him. I felt so delighted that my search was at an end that I'm afraid I flashed him a smile! I wouldn't be surprised if he followed this up—and I can scarcely blame him if he does! Mr. Ellis, it might be quite useful to the Prince's

relatives if I could find out a little more about this man—and why he didn't contradict those rumours at their request.'

'Quite so,' said Mr. Ellis. 'But don't be in a hurry. We might hear more from other people. Now that the truth is out, a pattern may form. It sometimes does.'

Mr. Pardo's pattern lost no time.

While Mrs. Betterton-Best was dressing for dinner, a page handed in a bouquet of carnations. Mr. Pardo had already discovered her name. With the flowers there was a letter:

I would wish to send you flowers hourly, but that might only embarrass you, endanger this encounter, and confound my foolish hopes of another glimpse.

Will you join me for an aperitif tomorrow at noon? I have torn a tendon while fencing, and am tethered to my own quarters at present. Can you pity my predicament, for I am now within reach yet out of sight of heaven?

Caesar Pardo

Mrs. Betterton-Best was rather touched by the delicacy with which this tendon sought to save her face—it was more than her brazen smile deserved. The buccancer which she suspected in him was capable of charm—and it was quite subtle of him not to send roses.

Mr. Ellis was electrified by the speed of Mr. Pardo's reactions. 'I doubt you've put yourself in an awkward position—a refusal may offend.' Mr. Ellis had also underestimated Mrs. Betterton-Best.

'But I won't refuse. I shall send a sympathetic note that we will be delighted to join him at noon. What could be simpler?'

Shortly after noon next day they presented themselves at Mr. Pardo's suite.

The thin, elderly valet announced them, and if Mr. Pardo felt any regret that Mrs. Betterton-Best was not alone, his buoyant welcome revealed no trace.

'My secretary, Mr. Ellis,' she introduced them.

Gallantly Mr. Pardo said: 'Sir, I can forgive you anything now that I know you are not this enchanting lady's husband!'

Mr. Ellis saw before him a man of arresting appearance. He had a vigorous manner, an unusually rapid form of address, and his eyes gleamed with amusement. The ice was not broken

—it simply could not exist in this handsome and dynamic presence. Their first ten minutes with him passed like seconds. He fired questions at Mr. Ellis, compliments at Mrs. Betterton-Best, and rallied his valet on the miserable amount of ice available for their drinks. 'Send Olaf for more,' he ordered. 'A Swede should be able to cut ice! Tell him to go to the bar. The floor-service exists only for the floor-waiter's convenience—'

Olaf, she guessed, must be the masseur. She took a keen look at the valet, as one of the two servants believed to have spread those rumours. He had the wrinkled, suffering face of an old monkey, and the dignity of complete detachment. She felt sure he had been a considerable time in Mr. Pardo's service. Much more likely to have been some of the hotel servants who first circulated the rumour. Apparently the strained tendon was a fact—their host limped.

But now Mr. Pardo was questioning her: When had she arrived . . . what had she done . . . was she a gambler? Had they enjoyed the recent concert? Bruno Verlag was coming next week—

Somewhat to her surprise, Mr. Ellis now showed enthusiasm—he had heard Verlag in London last April. In two minutes they were discussing Verlag hammer and tongs—Mr. Pardo had kindled Mr. Ellis too. . . .

While they talked, her glance flashed round the room—the same, yet how utterly different from that of years ago! Was it the absence of flowers? She could scarcely believe it was the same—Then suddenly breath failed her for a second—

On a table at the balcony window, beside some books and binoculars stood a large framed photograph—she stared again . . . *her* photograph of Charles in his sun helmet, identical in every detail.

For a second she was stunned, but she had sustained too much to be over-powered now.

Swiftly she said, 'While Mr. Ellis is finishing his drink—may I have a glimpse from *your* balcony, Mr. Pardo? The grass is always greener across the fence you know!' She actually managed an arch little stay-where-you-are nod to Mr. Ellis.

Smiling, Mr. Pardo followed her, his limp scarcely noticeable.

Mrs. Betterton-Best picked up the binoculars in passing—

and then stopped short. She glanced at the photograph and said softly:

'What a wonderful likeness of you—forgive me . . . my behaviour must seem atrocious!'

His hand on her elbow, he guided her on to the balcony.

'And do you really think,' he said quietly, 'that I am fatuous enough to keep my own photograph beside me?'

Glancing up she saw that for the first time he appeared to be quite sincere, and she was nonplussed.

'But it's such a fine photograph,' she protested.

They had reached the balcony parapet. Frowning he said: 'You are determined not to believe me. I could convince you but I don't feel disposed to do so in front of our chaperone. It is, in fact, rather a curious story—'

His candour compelled respect. She lowered the binoculars and said with equal frankness: 'I'm sorry. I've been clumsy—from the start. Won't you join me for coffee next door tonight, after dinner? About nine? Mr. Ellis usually smokes downstairs for a little.'

'I warn you,' Mr. Pardo said, 'that it is not a pretty story.'

Again she had the courage to glance up at him. 'We are not children,' she said briefly. It was almost a relief to see his smile challenging her again. . . .

Back in her own suite she told Mr. Ellis of the arrangement for coffee that night.

'You can't do that, Mrs. Betterton-Best,' he said sharply, 'it wouldn't be safe.'

'Why not?' she was astonished.

'I have formed the opinion that this man is a lunatic.'

She gave a gasp of laughter. 'But, Mr. Ellis, that's fantastic! What on earth makes you think so?'

Mr. Ellis compressed his lips. 'I didn't see him long enough to give you chapter and verse. But I've formed my opinion. And I've a notion that I'm right.'

'But there must have been something,' she urged, 'to give you such an extraordinary impression.'

'I didn't like the look in his eye—a sort of exhilaration.'

'But that's vitality—he's one of those intensely physical people with energy to spare. It's not common, but I've met it before.'

'I've met it too,' Mr. Ellis replied briefly. He had no intention of citing Lord Lowrance and Mr. Wraxe, two clients who had manifested a similar exhilaration during interviews which Mr. Ellis had found extremely uncomfortable—before these gentlemen had been finally deprived of their powers of attorney.

Mrs. Betterton-Best was still laughing. 'In any case, he must be harmless, or he wouldn't be at large—' Now that she knew who Mr. Pardo was *not*, she was so well-disposed to him that she felt she could forgive him being a member of the Ku-Klux-Klan.

'Quite so,' Mr. Ellis retorted, 'but if you'll be good enough to humour me in my obsession, we'll take a reasonable precaution.'

'Oh, certainly,' she agreed hastily. 'In any case our little coffee-party won't last more than twenty minutes or so. Then I shall tell him we're going on to the Casino, and may we drive him with us. You can come upstairs for us, if you like.'

'No, Mrs. Betterton-Best,' Mr. Ellis said coldly. 'You've arranged this coffee meeting in what seems to me a precipitate way—even allowing for your surprise at the sight of that photograph. And if you mean to see Mr. Pardo alone, out of reach of his servants, I'd rather wait in your bedroom.'

She stared at him for a second, and it was characteristic of her that she kept her countenance—also that her objection was practical.

'What would be the use of that? My bedroom door must be shut. You wouldn't hear a thing.'

'I've thought of that,' and Mr. Ellis crossed to the balcony window next the bedroom wall. There he mounted a chair, released the detaining curtain-hook, and slid the curtain slightly away from this inner wall. 'I'm not interested in Mr. Pardo's conversation. I can go on to the balcony from your bedroom and see through this slit how you're getting on.'

'But, Mr. Ellis,' she protested again, 'my guest may stroll on to the balcony—he may suggest we watch the sunset—anything!'

'No,' Mr. Ellis was emphatic, 'you will almost close this French window before he arrives, and if you move on to the balcony, I'll hear you at it, and get back.'

Impatiently she thought: the Scots are known to be cautious, but this is sheer melodrama! It must be his Highland blood. Aloud she said:

'I do think all this is rather absurd . . . And for goodness' sake don't emerge until he and I have gone downstairs. Then meet us in the front hall.'

'That will be the arrangement,' Mr. Ellis replied stiffly. He too was reflecting: there's no deterring a woman who is consumed with curiosity. I doubt the poor creature's confidence has been shaken. . . .

Mr. Pardo's manner on arriving for coffee at once clinched the absurdity of Mr. Ellis's theory. Nothing could have been more matter of fact. He was much less cordial than he had been as host, and came to the point with business-like directness.

After his first sip, humorously he said: 'I realize, of course, that I owe my present privilege to your beguiling curiosity alone. I also realize that our time is short, for you have not told me whether the admirable Mr. Ellis smokes a cigarette or a cigar!'

Despite herself, she was touched by his directness, and slightly ashamed of her own subterfuge. Sweetly enough she said:

'Forgive me—and let the story wait, if you are no longer in the mood.'

Tolerantly he nodded. 'To postpone is to miss the point of existence. The title of my tale is the Prince and the Plutocrat—and I must of course tell it in my own way.'

'But of course,' she assured him.

'He was the Prince,' Mr. Pardo informed her, 'I was and am the Plutocrat. Apart from two factors he and I were indistinguishable. One was our birth—background, heritage, call it what you like. But this difference also united us, for we met as students when he was on vacation in South America, where his family had business interests. There he revelled in what he called the patriarchal privacy of my father's country estates. We were inseparable. Another David and Jonathan. But the other factor of difference proved my first disillusionment. He lacked my enthusiasm. Once at a stadium we heard this citation awarded to a winner: *He led from start to finish, and broke his*

own record. "God!" I exclaimed, "to have an epitaph like that would be worth living for!" But my hero shook his head. "It chills me," he said. His reaction certainly chilled me,' Mr. Pardo added, 'elderly at eighteen I found it—' he paused.

Impulsively she exclaimed, 'I can understand that—yes, your reaction would have been mine on that occasion!'

Mr. Pardo lifted her hand, kissed it lightly, politely replaced it, and continued:

'There he was, sitting pretty at the top of the tree from birth—of course he'd no ambition! But at the time I was too young and idiotic to realize this superiority. I ecstasized, I suffered, I forgave. And there was plenty to forgive, I can assure you, for as we grew older he became increasingly reluctant to meet me on my rare visits to Europe. Admittedly our resemblance was an embarrassment to him there, as invariably people mistook the Plutocrat for the Prince—travelling incognito. To humour him, I kept out of Italy—but the climax came in France in the spring of 1910. The Prince had declined to meet me at Madrid—domestic reasons kept him in Italy. Nevertheless, I travelled to Europe, and unknown to him found him far afield—in Paris to be precise. My valet Michel reported on our second night at the hotel that he was dining in a private room there. I verified this, but I did not disturb him,' Mr. Pardo gave a good-natured, half-contemptuous smile, 'for, after all, who is one's best friend and one's worst enemy but oneself after all.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best laughed outright. 'I like your spirit!'

'And I like your pretty laugh,' Mr. Pardo said pleasantly. 'I have a musical ear as befits a fervent soul. Few people laugh melodiously. You laughed as you left my suite this afternoon. Have I been witty, I said, or is she merely kind? Do you remember?'

'Remember?' she hesitated.

'The cerise brocade and gilded furniture of that private room at the Ritz?'

'Quite well,' but for a second her eye flickered nervously.

'Then remember not to laugh,' Mr. Pardo said distinctly. 'To laugh is dangerous, because a laugh does not date. I had a glimpse of you then, and certainly you have changed greatly since. I should not have known you again. But your laugh

betrayed you.' Amiably he nodded to her. 'You are Charles's little lollipop.'

'Mr. Pardo—' she began.

'I know, I know—' his tone was resigned. 'It's time to go—goodbye!' and he arose.

'*Goodbye*,' he repeated, but this time with a venom that stupefied her. The next moment his hands were round her throat, he was strangling the life out of her—

The last thing she heard as she fainted was Mr. Ellis crashing into the room, and a shattering shout. . . .

15. San Remo Siesta

For the next few hours Mr. Ellis ran that hotel de luxe, by the simple expedient of having an answer to every unprecedented circumstance that now arose. That a process of English law obtained, was neither here nor there in the teeth of Mr. Ellis's speed and assurance. The Management, enormously relieved by his statement that this catastrophe was not a matter for police but medical attendance, followed his instructions to the letter.

On finding that Mr. Ellis declined to have the hotel doctor for Madame, another noted physician was summoned. Mr. Ellis also demanded, to Mrs. Betterton-Best's intense annoyance, a night and day nurse until such time as Mr. Pardo and his attendants were removed from the hotel. As Mr. Ellis had an answer to every legal liability that threatened, the *Directeur* scarcely left his side until one in the morning. Such was Mr. Ellis's authority in this crisis that next day the enemy also sought his assistance—

Olaf and Michel, Mr. Pardo's travelling companions, were as he suspected that gentleman's unofficial keepers.

Sorrowfully, Michel now admitted that there had been occasionally other contretemps—but none of such a regrettable nature. For months, sometimes a year, Mr. Pardo conducted himself like a saint from heaven. Now, *hélas*, he was about to leave the hotel for a period in an appropriate sanatorium. Before departure he had requested Mr. Ellis's presence in

farewell. Apologetically Michel added: 'We try to save his feelings, monsieur.'

On the distinct understanding that Olaf would remain available throughout this interview, Mr. Ellis presented himself.

Mr. Pardo, reclining as powerfully as a panther on his chaise-longue, had received him with the *élan* which had first aroused his visitor's suspicion.

'I thank you for expediting these travel arrangements,' he announced. 'I have always said that Tom Cook was an able fellow—if a liar when confounded.' He handed Mr. Ellis a roll of French francs, which Mr. Ellis accepted with a bow and murmured thanks.

'You too have aged since last we met,' Mr. Pardo observed. 'The final exasperation of senescence is the knowledge that one has always been adored by the wrong people.'

'No one,' Mr. Ellis retorted with complete sincerity, 'has ever adored me.'

'The worst is yet to be,' Mr. Pardo prophesied. 'Get rid of Lollipop before it is too late—aging women confuse every issue.'

Mr. Ellis said he would bear it in mind.

'Moreover,' Mr. Pardo raised a monitory finger, 'fair women are invariably frigid. And mercenary—in fact an unrewarding experience. You may go.'

Mr. Ellis went.

Downstairs, he at once deposited his small fortune in French francs with the hotel manager, in Mr. Pardo's name—requesting, and receiving, a stamped receipt.

'You think of everything!' Mrs. Betterton-Best was now convalescent on her sofa, a wisp of ninon concealing her bruised neck. 'I have written the Duchess fully. And I have not minimized my martyrdom.'

Mr. Ellis could quite believe this.

'I have also told her that I am going to a quiet hotel at San Remo, with my secretary, to recuperate. I have given her my address there, but have made it quite plain that I cannot visit her in Venice.'

But at the quiet hotel they proved a furore. The Monte Carlo management, lavish to the last, had dispatched them in a

car embowered with bouquets. The padrone of the Santa Lucia and his staff at once concluded that this was a bridal couple. Festivity leapt through these modest premises in ejaculations of delight—for this was Italy again. And Mrs. Betterton-Best had considerable difficulty in relegating Mr. Ellis's luggage to another floor, so determined were the servants to believe that any such segregation was coquetry, or a lovers' tiff. . . .

Two days passed peacefully.

Mr. Ellis, after his recent feats found himself in a more expansive mood, and Mrs. Betterton-Best heard details that were new to her of his Barras boyhood, and his London life. So sympathetic a listener did she prove, that Miss Cresswell's gibe of Cinder-Ellis was actually recounted—without mention of the specific benefits that had inflamed that lady, for by now Mr. Ellis was completely at home in Mr. Steel's clothes, and the new spectacles. Mrs. Betterton-Best agreed that Miss Cresswell merited the description of besom. 'Although,' she added, 'I can think of another five letter word, also beginning with a B that fits her better!'

Hastily Mr. Ellis agreed—sometimes he found Mrs. Betterton-Best a trifle too modern. But he was completely mollified when she admitted:

'Now, I might truly be called a Cinderella,' and proceeded to describe a fairy godmother named Aunt Ada who had rescued one Rhoda from Goods Station Road Hammersmith, and set her down in this same San Remo once upon a time. These candid details took the last sting from Miss Cresswell's contempt.

Yet despite her frankness, she went alone to visit the old hotel, last seen twenty years ago—it held memories too precious to share.

Larger buildings had closed round it, part of its charming garden had gone, but, even so, this scarcely accounted for the alarming way in which this once stately edifice had shrunk. To the eye of childhood it had seemed majestic, and its fresh façade in these days, with bright balconies and window-boxes, had lent it an opulence unknown to Goods Station Road. Now, it resembled an old dolls-house, grown rickety with neglect, the paint patchy. Its window boxes were unkempt, the shrubs

straggled—as a rooming-house it had declined. She did not enter . . .

Miss Glossop's old *appartement*, in the town itself, had gained in importance. It had been a better address than Rhoda had earlier realized. As she stared up at its windows, she remembered the small luxurious interior which was already slightly shabby by the time she had arrived there at the age of fourteen. What had been Betsy Glossop's real story? What, for that matter, had been Aunt Ada's: In the selfish oblivion of youth she had lived with both these women for over ten years, taken their devotion to her for granted—and given her own love too late.

Subdued she returned to her present hotel.

'Mr. Ellis,' she said, 'this afternoon a great deal came back to me. And I remembered something Prince Vicenza told me, which I had completely forgotten. You will scarcely credit that I could . . . I can hardly believe it myself. But vanity accounts for a lot. During our first year together, when I once exclaimed that there had never been any one like him, he said, "Oh, yes, as a student I met another who might have been my double!" I just did not believe it—I realize now that I did not want to believe it. "We were fast friends for a time," he told me, "but I found him too intense—later I had to make a break."'

'Well, well,' Mr. Ellis said handsomely, 'they say love is blind, and in your case it's been deaf too! You only remembered as much as you wished—it's a common occurrence. Now, I've a notion that you've got a photograph of Mr. Pardo at the Villa in Turkish fancy-costume. There are two of the same position in a book in the library, but after consideration I'm inclined to think that one is of Mr. Pardo. The two lads probably went to the same dance dressed identically—but that might prove a dangerous lark later in life . . .'

Next day the Duchess's letter arrived. Her gratitude was expressed with such solemnity that it read like a civic address. Mrs. Betterton-Best would not have been surprised to find she was invested with some order of chivalry by its close. Instead the missive ended with a request that did astonish her. Urgently the Duchess petitioned her presence—and as soon as possible. She desired Mrs. Betterton-Best's views and advice on *another* family matter—quite as pressing in a different way.

She begged Mrs. Betterton-Best to believe that her arrival at the Palazzo Baldassare would be an essential blessing for that house.

One hour later, curiosity had consumed Mrs. Betterton-Best to such an extent that Mr. Ellis resigned himself in advance to their departure there. The Duchess was playing her fish well.

'We must do nothing precipitate about it,' Mrs. Betterton-Best declared. 'At the same time, the weather has undoubtedly broken here.'

Next morning an express envelope reached her from the Duchess. It contained several Italian newspaper cuttings citing the dangerous illness of Mr. Caesar Pardo, whose resemblance to the late Prince Vicenza had received a certain publicity on the Riviera. This unfortunate invalid had recently attacked and almost throttled a distinguished friend of Prince Vicenza's family while at the same hotel—a lamentable occurrence which had at once drawn attention to Mr. Pardo's condition. The gentleman was now under medical supervision, until such time as his American relations could remove him with safety.

Mrs. Betterton-Best's name was not mentioned, but she appeared in three versions with large type as: Friend of the Family Throttled.

Friend of the Family—wonders never cease, she decided. If it came to that, these articles concerned two friends of the family! It was odd that the family apparently knew nothing of that student friendship in South America.

Poor Pardo, she thought suddenly . . . I shall keep in touch with his doctors.

The night before she and Mr. Ellis left for the Palazzo Baldassare, she had revived again. Cheerfully she said:

'I've always longed to see Venice—let's hope it lives up to its name of the Serenissima!'

'But we are not going to Venice,' Mr. Ellis pointed out. 'According to the Duchess' last letter, we are going to her country Palazzo. I have already identified the district on the map. It is nowhere near the lagoons—a goodish forty miles away.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best was disconcerted, but recovered

quickly. 'It must be as near as makes no difference. Don't be so literal, or we'll get depressed again. That last night at Monte Carlo really got me down. The headland ablaze with lights looked exactly like a giant crocodile palpitating to snap! If we don't like Baldassare we'll move at once to Venice. I want you to enjoy Venice. But the Palazzo Baldassare is bound to be an interesting experience too. After all that insipid French rococo, I'm just in the mood for genuine baroque.'

'Just so!' and Mr. Ellis determined to dispatch a note to the Hislops right away, informing them that Mrs. Betterton-Best's business affairs had taken longer to terminate than he had expected. They might be some time yet in Italy. . . .

16. Venetian Dilemma

After an interminable journey, with several changes in torrential rain, the final train was halted for them on the Duchess's instructions, at a small country station which Mr. Ellis had been unable to trace on his map—a siding which announced itself as Fortezza.

Mrs. Betterton-Best, with her facility for recording pleasant memories only, like the sundial, had forgotten that in Italy when it rains, it deluges.

She alighted at Fortezza announcing: 'I've a good mind to go back right away—'

Unhappily, the train went forward, and was already unceremoniously departing—the engine driver none too pleased by this delay. The porter at Fortezza, who was also the station-master, reported that there would be no other train that day, but his illustrious visitors would not require this, as a carriage awaited them on the other side of the shed. The thunder had unfortunately made the horses nervous—

Mrs. Betterton-Best translated for Mr. Ellis's benefit. 'It's not even a junction—it's just a place that trains rush past, shrieking, and no wonder!'

Together they splashed through the downpour. The shed was so small that it was quicker to walk round it—

There, a monumental carriage awaited them. Neither had ever seen its equal. It resembled something between a hearse and a posting chariot, its funereal black relieved only by its

coat of arms. The coachman stood to attention in uniform of black, gold and purple. A groom with the swarthy smile of a theatrical brigand held the heads of two miserable nags.

'Can this,' Mrs. Betterton-Best muttered as she got in, 'be a sample of what is to follow?'

'Baroque right enough,' Mr. Ellis did his best to look their gift horse appreciatively in its black mouth. It put him in mind of a state-carriage of the fourteenth century, although its dusty velvet interior was furnished with a more modern pistol-holder and sword-case.

The coachman, vociferous with Italian compliments, bundled their luggage in beside them, without ceremony. The gipsy-like groom then leapt on to the rumble at the back, and the coachman, issuing a volley of farewells to the porter, mounted the perch and cracked his whip.

Lashed by rain and their driver, the two nags made off with surprising speed—

The two passengers inside were flung against each other, or over their luggage as the road deteriorated, which it rapidly did. Further and further along a deeply rutted track they went—on either hand a flat desolate landscape, its monotony broken here and there by sluggish canals.

To Mrs. Betterton-Best's dismay, a growing suspicion was finally confirmed. There was no other habitation here but the Palazzo Baldassare—it must have been the original fortress that gave the railway siding its name. This dismal country road was its avenue—stretching from the station, across empty fields, to what she now recognized as the dead-end before them.

'No doubt,' Mr. Ellis volunteered, 'this would look somewhat different in sunshine.'

'No doubt,' Mrs. Betterton-Best replied. 'Then it would be a desert—now it is a swamp.'

'Come, come,' he peered through the streaming window, 'then it should be fine arable land. Cereals in abundance, I wouldn't be surprised. When it clears you'll see it will carry a deal of cattle—yes, and orchards by the acre. With this southern exposure, you'll find a yield of two hay harvests every year—'

'No, I won't! I must have been mad to have come to such a place. I warn you that if it's as bad inside as out, we won't be

here two minutes. Do you realize that this is July, and already I'm numb with cold—all this water!

She was behaving like a spoilt schoolgirl, but she didn't care. Neither Charles nor Hugh would have recognized her. Once more she was intoxicated by her own annoyance, and the relief of free speech. Mr. Ellis didn't know her as the poised and perfect, and so was proving a godsend in more ways than one.

'The wind's driving off the Alps across this plain,' he told her equably, 'the cold's to be expected.'

'Not in July,' she snapped.

'But so,' he maintained. 'Now, Mrs. Betterton-Best, as your secretary, do you wish me to address the Duchess as your Grace—or Duchess . . . I don't speak Italian, remember.'

'Duchess, of course—and I hope and pray that neither of us will address her for long . . . Just look at that!'

They had arrived, but the fountain had overflowed the forecourt, and a sheet of shallow water separated them from the entrance.

Mrs. Betterton-Best's unerring eye saw at once that the Palazzo Baldassare was not the original fortress, but an enormous structure of inferior design. It was, in fact, pseudo-Palladian and looked more impressive than usual as the summer storm lent it drama and concealed its dilapidation.

Mrs. Betterton-Best was lifted bodily out of the coach by the gipsy groom and carried across the forecourt like some reluctant mediaeval bride. Mr. Ellis, foolishly disdaining the same service, splashed manfully to the front door and was drenched to the knees.

There, a major-domo, in a green, gold and purple uniform which did not fit him, received them with dignity, and escorted them through a stone vestibule to a cavernous hall hung with banners and tapestries, where a large log fire, recently lit, hissed and spluttered. This fire was to remain throughout the visit more of a decoration—a stage fire to suggest that on the left was the proverbial merry blaze. There was also an engulfing draught which convinced Mrs. Betterton-Best that one side of this ducal set had been removed in error, exposing the wings there. The banners billowed, the pictures flapped, the tapestries undulated on the walls. She no longer had the

slightest curiosity as to the Duchess's problems. Persons who dwelt in such a place could only have one that concerned Mrs. Betterton-Best—this deplorable environment which she now shared.

With the arrival of their luggage, the great front door was shut, the banners ceased to billow, and a pale, dark-haired woman, of about thirty years, hastened into the hall to greet them, her clothes of such an old-fashioned sort that Mrs. Betterton-Best at once concluded this must be the house-keeper—

The moment the woman spoke, she perceived her mistake.

'I am the Duchess's grand-daughter,' she said gravely, shaking hands, 'Ludmilla Vienne. I am much distressed that these heavy showers should meet you! My grandmother will welcome you at dinner time—meanwhile you will wish to rest.'

Mr. Ellis was staring at her pale thin face, with its large dark eyes and sensitive lips—astonished by the resemblance she bore to the photograph of his mother as a young woman . . . even the clothes were similar.

The Contessina, turning towards him, saw his steady gaze behind those formidable spectacles. She too was arrested—and said to Mrs. Betterton-Best:

'And this gentleman?'

'Mr. Ellis is my secretary.'

'Your secretary?' the Contessina echoed, shaking hands with Mr. Ellis. 'Forgive me—we expected a lady.'

'Yes, Mr. James Blair Ellis,' Mrs. Betterton-Best rolled it off firmly. 'A Scotsman.'

'A Scotsman!' the Contessina exclaimed, and both guests were totally unprepared for the delight that irradiated her thin face. 'My father was a Frenchman, and often told me of our old Alliance. He held you in veneration . . .' Again she shook hands devoutly with Mr. Ellis. 'I cherish all that belongs to Scotland. That will explain,' she added, 'that you recognize me just now, yes?' and she smiled.

Again Mr. Ellis was startled. Mrs. Betterton-Best's lovely mouth had a singularly sweet smile which confirmed its beauty, but the Contessina's smile was a revelation—it transformed a pale image into enchanting animation.

As she moved off with Mrs. Betterton-Best, Mr. Ellis held

back. He could not account for this lady, her appearance or her odd remarks—and shelved both for the present, as was his custom. He turned to the major-domo—

‘Your bedroom, sir? Yes, you too are there . . . we follow the ladies—have no anxiety.’

But at that moment the Contessina paused, and, looking round, said alertly:

‘Put Mr. James Blair Ellis in the Duke’s suite. And turn on the heat.’

He will now adjoin the Duchess, Mrs. Betterton-Best realized. Mr. Ellis is certainly going from strength to strength . . .

Alone in her own spacious chamber, her eye approved the Venetian richness of its hangings and the immaculate linen of the bed, the ornate *prie-dieu*, the velvet chairs—but her nose sniffed critically: If Mr. Ellis’s room is as damp as this, it will be fatal to turn on heat. He will steam—

Nevertheless, she at once turned on the only electric fire she could find. She had travelled from London with Riviera clothes, and no hot bottle—

Perhaps a maid might lend one? She rang her bedroom bell twice, without reply. The Palazzo Baldassare was not an hotel of course—more was the pity! Cold she could not stand . . . she resolved upon a hot bath before dinner. There would just be time—

The bathroom opened from her bedroom, and its mosaic magnificence momentarily quelled her. As a bathroom she had never seen its equal. There was an ultimate splendour about it that suggested Pompeii.

As she stood there in respectful silence, she heard a curious thudding behind the walls for which she could not at first account. This was followed at intervals by an intermittent squeal. It was a moment or two before she realized with horror that these were rats at their revels—Venetian rats.

Then she turned on the water. Steam, rusty débris, and finally a reluctant flow of bright-green water responded to her need. The colour of the water alone remained consistent as it jerked through the massive tap. To immerse in that would be to emerge as green as a lemonade bottle—

This is she, - hell, Mrs. Betterton-Best decided, I shall leave tomorrow. Early. . . .

The Duchess, who had just been informed of the advent of a male secretary was as annoyed. Earlier she had felt irritated at the idea of that woman with a female secretary. The Duchess had no secretary despite a voluminous business correspondence. Her grand-daughter saw to that—and other matters. Secretaries cost money, and money was the Duchess's obsession. Mrs. Betterton-Best's handwriting from San Remo had also upset the Duchess. It was strong, incisive, almost masculine—not unlike the Duchess's own. Not at all what she expected.

Years ago Charles, when challenged after an outrageous absence of weeks, had given her to understand that his mistress was a dear little dumpling of a creature—completely domesticated—who would never give the slightest trouble, if left alone. As such mistresses were born, not made, the Duchess had hoped he would have the sense to remain constant and the lady to keep quiet. Charles was not amorous, but earlier there had been a Polish countess who had insisted on fraternizing with the family—

The Duchess had been only too glad to eschew all contact with the dumpling, until the advent of Mr. Pardo when Charles's attorneys, Rocchia and Gaddi had refused, point blank, to furnish her with the woman's address—thus running up further fees for themselves as negotiators.

The fact that the dumpling should so have lost her head in retirement as to support a secretary, had made the Duchess wonder precisely how extravagant Charles had been with his domestic treasure. This latest intelligence that the secretary was a man had proved a final exasperation. At once the Duchess suspected monkey-business. And the fact that Ludmilla, a born fool, if ever there was one, should have put him into the Duke's suite, simply proved again how those present-day upstarts got away with everything.

Nevertheless, the Duchess added her pearls to her black evening gown, and her diamond clasp. She knew what was due to herself. She was a thickset, muscular woman who looked less than her height because of her massive build, and vigorously less than her seventy years. Her iron-grey hair was brushed into a natural Pompadour which gave her brow a dignity it lacked, but her long nose was sapient, her lizard eyes beneath

heavy lids missed nothing, and her narrow, sensitive lips were more than off-set by a heavy obstinate chin. Such was her appearance, but it could vary in a volatile and alarming way with the particular passion that aroused her. At any given moment, however, she was a force to be reckoned with. The brief portrait which Prince Vicenza had once drawn of his elderly half-sister had not been engaging, and in the past ten years, through absence of opposition, she had become increasingly formidable.

The monkey-business was still rankling when she entered her drawing-room, the only salon in the Palazzo furnished in the French style, with crystal chandeliers, gilded woodwork, grey brocaded panels, and a ruby carpet that warmed the ghostly glass ceiling.

A few minutes later her two guests appeared.

As they walked across that spectacular carpet, one glance at Mr. Ellis satisfied the Duchess that here was no lover. He might conceivably be a husband, but he certainly did not belong to Mrs. Betterton-Best—

The Duchess scarcely noticed that lady's comeliness in a discreetly elegant gown by Lucille—she had known too many beauties and had a small opinion of the breed. But Mrs. Betterton-Best's personality astonished her. This was no dumpling, but a thorough-paced madame—and Charles's duplicity was once more that of all men.

The Duchess advanced to meet them with a ceremony that compelled participation in this rite—yet shook hands with an engaging cordiality. Her English was fluent, her voice deep and slightly, but not unpleasantly guttural.

'Mrs. Betterton-Best,' she announced, 'I am so much in your debt—and that of Mr. Blair Ellis—that I shall not burden you with thanks now. You must both be tired after that journey. I only regret that I could not meet you on this important occasion at my house in Venice—another family difficulty that we shall postpone until tomorrow.'

As a footman proffered sherry, Mrs. Betterton-Best replied with just enough charm to sweeten the pill of her own perfection; and Mr. Ellis was privately impressed by the ease with which both these ladies exchanged pleasantries—antagonists although he instantly recognized them to be.

In this fluent atmosphere where ease was a mutual conspiracy, he did not find it difficult to make appropriate comments on weather, trains and travel as such topics were tossed to him. It was also speedily borne in upon him that both ladies in their confrontation welcomed his neutral presence—that in some way he cushioned the occasion. Vocal or dumb his success was therefore assured, and in Mr. Steel's admirable dinner jacket he proceeded to relax.

'You must forgive a lack of formality here,' the Duchess warned him. 'Baldassare is the focal point of four farms.'

'As a crofter's son,' he assured her, 'no centre could interest me more—'

At that moment the Contessina entered, a trifle breathless. She too had changed, but into an afternoon frock of an earlier decade. Its violet kimono blouse fell in a loose tunic over a straight, ankle-length skirt—and Mrs. Betterton-Best wondered what on earth she'd do with the turban and aigrette which had once accompanied that garb. The poor girl's figure, slight yet clumsy was at its worst in this confection. The Duchess, severely upholstered in velvet looked much more modern. But the Contessina seemed younger tonight—in fact her pale face was so flushed that Mrs. Betterton-Best wondered if she had cooked dinner . . . a fantasy she at once dismissed remembering that abroad female aristocrats may delve in the garden, but never enter the kitchen.

They dined in a lofty chamber, hung with old masters, and panelled at intervals with mirrors which reflected the pomona-green curtains, quince-coloured chairs, and the blazing table candelabra—an interior diminished by a painted ceiling which depicted Bacchus and his bacchantes rioting among the vines.

The meal itself proved to be the achievement of a professional chef. The soup with which it started was the *risi e bisi* that once opened all official banquets under the ancient Republic of Venice. Mrs. Betterton-Best enjoyed it immensely—she also began to feel warmer. Before this course was finished, both the Duchess and Mr. Ellis—much to her surprise—were engrossed in the subject of farming.

As the Duchess bemoaned the possible fate of her harvest in this storm, it could be seen that Mr. Ellis was producing the same mollifying effect on her that he had had on Franklyn

Frobisher and Steel's more difficult clients . . . Crop prices were the next issue. With increasing gusto (to Mrs. Betterton-Best's boredom) costs in Italy were bandied to and fro between them.

The Duchess, carried away by Mr. Ellis's unexpected acumen in this matter, actually quoted the last returns on her four Fortezza farms.

Mr. Ellis stared at her with unconcealed admiration: 'I call that an achievement.'

'Ha!' she scoffed, 'it's the first time I have received such an acknowledgement. My relatives take it all for granted. And of course I have other properties in Zollfeld and Veit, but none interest me like the farms. My son finds he cannot deal with more than his estates in Tuscany.'

'But these four farms,' Mr. Ellis protested, 'and two of such a size—do you tell me that you manage all this single-handed?'

'I have three stewards, and often find these more trouble than the other hands put together.'

Sympathetically Mr. Ellis quoted: 'Who will keep an eye on the watchman!'

'I do that,' the Duchess retorted, 'and let me assure you that it is a twenty-four hour task. I have recently been singularly unfortunate in two of the men appointed.'

'The more credit to you in those returns,' Mr. Ellis exclaimed. 'I've never before heard of any woman handling such an enterprise.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best and the Contessina were completely forgotten, but Mrs. Betterton-Best was concentrating on her macaroni, and the girl, much paler now that her flush had subsided, watched her discreetly. The eating of macaroni is an art that once achieved, is never lost—and her guest was dealing with hers in a suitably summary way.

Mrs. Betterton-Best, glancing up, saw that the younger woman was observing her with an odd yearning. Making due allowance for those soulful brown orbs, there was still an undoubted sincerity in their gaze. Below the continuous dialogue of the Duchess and Mr. Ellis, the Contessina addressed her in a low voice:

'I hope that you will enjoy the *granseole veneziane* which follows—our sea trout are delicate.'

'Indeed I shall,' Mrs. Betterton-Best said heartily. 'Your

chef is an artist—how I envy you! In London it is increasingly difficult to find one nowadays.'

Apologetically the Contessina said: 'It is not everyone who perceives what they eat.'

'At the risk of flattering myself,' her guest replied, 'all sound minds do!'

'Ah!' the Contessina's expressive eyes were reverent, 'but I have always known that you are unique! This afternoon, at a glance, it is all confirmed.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best was touched, although she had no idea what she was raving about. With a little wink, and Rhoda could wink adorably, she replied: 'You and I must see more of one another—if this sanity is to be preserved. Especially as our farming friends have now reached the subject of soils and manures.'

The Contessina nodded. 'It is a double miracle—that you should arrive, after all these years . . . and bring Mr. James Blair Ellis with you. Yes,' she added hastily, 'whatever be the outcome!'

But Mrs. Betterton-Best scarcely heard her—for the first time she had seen the younger woman's hands. Scrubbed to cleanliness, they remained small, rough and seamed with cracks—the thumb and forefinger of each hand stained grey-green. Rhoda had not seen such hands since those belonging to the charwoman in Goods Station Road. The contrast between those prematurely old, water-withered hands and the smooth neck of the Contessina was startling.

What's going on here? From that moment Mrs. Betterton-Best was on the alert.

Once only in the course of the meal did the Duchess address her grand-daughter, and in such an acid tone that Mr. Ellis looked up, while Mrs. Betterton-Best was flabbergasted by the remark itself.

'Why,' the Duchess demanded, 'have you drawn the Piedmontese? We already have Marino in our glasses.'

The Contessina grew paler. 'The steak demands it,' she said in a low voice, 'and . . . and the night is cold.'

'Imbecile!' the Duchess retorted, and returned to Mr. Ellis and the dangers of chemical fertilizers.

Softly Mrs. Betterton-Best addressed the Contessina. 'You

have given us a banquet! We will never forget it. Later tonight may I borrow a hot-water bottle? I did not bring one.'

The younger woman's face lit up. 'But of course . . . of course! And Mr. Blair Ellis too. Have no fear! You have enjoyed the salad with the Treviso radishes? Ah! I am happy . . .

By the time dessert was on the table, Mrs. Betterton-Best knew that the Contessina, although aware of her every need, the movements of both servants in the room, the arrival and departure of each dish—was yet following the dialogue between the Duchess and Mr. Ellis with a marvelling intentness—

At this point, she glanced across at Mrs. Betterton-Best again, blushed slightly, and dropped her gaze.

Mrs. Betterton-Best, bored beyond belief with the fat-stock market which had now been reached, blandly intervened:

'Duchess, is that glorious canvas over there a Rembrandt!'

The Duchess, deflected from cattle costs past and present, dismissed this interruption with asperity: 'It would not be there if it were not.'

But Mrs. Betterton-Best had revived. 'And it should not be there, if it is! Rembrandt above a radiator—sacrilege!'

'Mrs. Betterton-Best is an authority on painting,' Mr. Ellis announced hastily.

'Turn the radiator off,' the Duchess ordered the major-domo.

'Oh, no, no!' Mrs. Betterton-Best cried merrily, 'take the Rembrandt down!'

The Contessina laughed hysterically, the major-domo wavered, and the Duchess at last turned her attention fully on her female guest.

'Is the picture yours or mine?' she demanded.

'Yours, yours,' Mrs. Betterton-Best assured her, 'to my eternal regret. Great heavens, how I envy you . . . so at least let me keep the radiator!'

Something like the glimmer of a smile flickered across the Duchess' face. 'We shall adjourn,' she said and rose. 'No,' she ordered Mr. Ellis, 'pray finish your nuts and wine.'

As he sank back on his chair, he reflected that this tussle had been a near thing. These two ladies were much of a mettle. I doubt we're in for trouble, he concluded, and that poor lassie at the other end of the table has spent too much on our dinner . . .

Entering the drawing-room later he was surprised to find an atmosphere of honeyed peace—women were kittle-cattle! Coffee and compliments were being dispensed, and all three ladies looked up, enlivened, as he approached for Mr. Ellis in Mr. Steel's dinner-jacket was a dignified figure. Moreover, in the combination of those formidable tortoise-shell glasses and his calm voice there resided a certain olympian quality. The Duchess herself was not unaffected by it.

'A man like you,' she declared, 'should never have moved off the land. It is an idiotic waste. Scriveners are two-a-penny. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

'At my age,' Mr. Ellis said mildly, 'it is too late to repine.'

'Rubbish! You're good for another twenty years yet. The land remains our one reality. People like you are needed as never before. As I told you at dinner, if the scientists aren't watched like hawks, earth, animals, fresh water, sea and air will all be exploited to their damnation—and man's. The very bread we eat, ruined—'

'*But with the morning,*' the Contessina quoted, '*cool repentance came.*'

Mr. Ellis turned sharply. 'You know your Rob Roy?' he was astonished.

'Scotland,' the Duchess said sarcastically, 'is her Cloud Cuckoo Land. Her French father reared her on Balzac and Walter Scott. By the time she reached me at the age of fourteen her own traditions meant nothing to her.'

But for once the Contessina did not change colour, she made Mr. Ellis a little bow. 'My father also translated for me your Declaration of Arbroath. It was, he said, one of the noblest documents in history: *We fight not for glory nor for wealth nor honours: but only and alone we fight for Freedom, which no good man surrenders but with his life!*'

Mr. Ellis stared at her. 'I'm ashamed to tell you,' he said, 'that few Scots today could quote the Declaration of Arbroath as you have done.'

'But why did it fail?' she urged, her thin face alive with interest.

'We had traitors in our midst, and a poverty that griped.'

'These men should all have been executed,' the Duchess declared.

Mr. Ellis directed his tortoise-shell glasses towards her. 'Sometimes you find these gentlemen in charge—then it's not so easy.'

'As the only Sassenach present,' Mrs. Betterton-Best announced, 'I recognize myself as anathema'—she smiled to the Contessina. 'Exorcize me with a song . . . you promised to sing a few minutes ago.'

Again Mr. Ellis was surprised by the Contessina. 'But of course!' the shy creature said eagerly and crossed over to the grand piano.

The Duchess shrugged. 'Her voice is quite pleasing—but its training has been inadequate.'

The younger woman turned. 'Grand'mère,' she said quietly, 'the tuition at school was the best of its kind. It is my own fault if I have not profited—'

The Duchess took this better than Mrs. Betterton-Best expected—she seemed almost appeased by this dignified retort, and her guest with a flash of insight realized: it's a pity the girl does not show more spirit always. And she's tired now—

But at the piano the Contessina freshened at once. She accompanied herself in a most felicitous fashion. Her voice was small but peculiarly sweet and true, and she sang some Lieder with perfect taste. Mr. Ellis was in a better position nowadays to appreciate this performance as Mr. Hislop had earlier instructed him that more musicianship was needed to put over Lieder than an operatic part. The Duchess herself relaxed, lit a cheroot, and admitted to Mr. Ellis: 'She plays well enough.'

The Contessina needed no persuasion to remain at the piano. It was a powerful ally—and she knew it.

'This is a song for you,' she told Mrs. Betterton-Best, and then sang in English, with a delicate nostalgia:

*There is a lady sweet and kind,
Was ever face so pleased my mind
I did but see her passing by,
And yet I love her till I die.*

From that it was an easy stage to Tosti's *Mattinata* but after his *Serenata* ended, the Duchess exclaimed:

'That sort of sentiment sounds best on the Grand Canal by moonlight. Years ago I heard Melba herself sing these with

Tosti on a gondola. They went out one perfect night on impulse. Venice heard but did not see her sing, and imagined that the gods were come again.'

'And she told us once,' the Contessina nodded, 'that when she too listened to De Reszke she had sometimes wondered if his gift—always regarded as transient as the passing of summer, or the fading of a rose, might not after all have eternal being—'

'Nonsense,' the Duchess interrupted. 'In its transience is its value.'

This observation surprised Mrs. Betterton-Best. The woman had more imagination than she had guessed—

Mr. Ellis was again congratulating the Duchess: 'You've got something there,' he remarked. 'Life itself is supported by the breath of the moment.'

'No!' the Contessina exclaimed almost passionately. 'Breath is mortal, spirit immortal. Beyond our octave, another most surely resides in eternal perfection.'

'Beyond our gasp and grasp,' Mrs. Betterton-Best said lightly. 'I rather like that. You also have something there—as those two certainly cannot disprove it.'

The Contessina bestowed her bewitching smile—then, turning to Mr. Ellis, she made him another demure little bow:

'My last song,' she said, 'is from Scotland—of a flower still blooming without a breath.'

And, pure and effortless, her voice gave life again to *A Red Red Rose*

At this song's end the Duchess, who daily awakened early, barely concealed a yawn, and the gathering broke up with alacrity; but the evening had passed more agreeably than Mrs. Betterton-Best expected. . . .

Ten minutes after she had reached her bedroom, a tap on the door announced the Contessina with a copper warming-pan.

Blushing she bore it in. 'You will forgive the intrusion—but our servants here are country girls . . .' with a practised hand she plunged it into the regal bed. 'All has been well aired—soon now you will be warm.'

Her guest was contrite.

'No, no,' the Contessina insisted, 'all this is a pleasure. And Luigi, our major-domo, has taken one to Mr. Blair Ellis.

I pray that you will sleep well. Breakfast will be brought you at any hour you wish.'

'But when am I to see the Duchess for that private talk she wished so urgently?'

Earnestly the Contessina said: 'At eleven o'clock tomorrow morning, in her boudoir. She comes then from the farm-office. An hour has been set aside for this—' for some reason she again showed signs of breathlessness, as they faced each other across the bed.

'Sit down, won't you?' Mrs. Betterton-Best herself subsided on the bed.

Stiffly the younger woman sat down on the opposite side.

'You see,' Mrs. Betterton-Best explained, 'Mr. Ellis and I must leave tomorrow—so our departure cannot be too late.'

'Tomorrow,' echoed the other, 'you cannot leave! There are only two trains in the day which will stop at Fortezza—but always this must be arranged. Then too grand'mère needs the horses for the farm tomorrow. Oh! forgive us!'

'The morning after, then, we *must* go,' Mrs. Betterton-Best exclaimed a trifle wildly. 'There can be no doubt of that!'

'Yes, yes,' the Contessina assured her, 'that is what she expects—do not be afraid. All will be arranged—you will get away.'

These last words struck her guest as all too apt and she conjured a smile, 'You have been kindness itself, and I sound so ungracious—but this visit was one I did not expect. I am anxious to return home.'

'Yes, yes,' the Contessina said soothingly, 'to your beautiful Villa with the Sphinx on the parapet—my Uncle Charles told me of it.'

'Did he?' in her astonishment Mrs. Betterton-Best's voice shook.

The Contessina nodded, smiling at the coverlet of the bed. 'I was thirteen years of age the last time he spent some days with us in Paris. He found me one evening gazing at your photograph which stood beside his bed in a gold-leaf folding frame, like a little sacred book. At that age one—one is not nervous, I asked him who you were. He said: 'Her name is Rhoda. There is a Sphinx upon the parapet of her Villa, and she has the courage of an angel.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best felt her eyes prick painfully.

'Next year,' the Contessina continued, 'he did not come because my mother died, and I came here. But before she—she left me, she told me who you were and that your home was in Regent's Park, but that I must never mention this. 'Some day,' she said, 'you may need a friend if you ever lose Charles—which God forbid.'

'But why on earth,' Rhoda exclaimed, 'have you never got in touch with me—Ludmilla?'

In some agitation the other arose. 'I was too nervous,' she said hurriedly. 'Once I arrived at grand'mère's Uncle Charles never mentioned you again. After his death I lost my confidence. Then, too, I could not travel—I . . . I had not the means.'

'This is quite frightful,' Rhoda said. 'He was the most generous man in the world—did he make no provision for you?'

For the first time the younger woman looked at her in astonishment. 'How could he?' she asked simply. 'He did not expect to die like that. But now . . . do not be sad—for we have met after all. Sleep well!' she smiled tenderly and moved towards the door.

Silently Rhoda surveyed this household drudge who was Charles's niece. She was beyond speech.

At the door the other turned. 'Oh!' she cried in sudden despair, 'there is tomorrow! So happy I have been—I had forgotten. Tomorrow you will not think so well of me. Grand'mère will tell you—Try to forgive me!'

'I could forgive you murder,' Rhoda said heartily.

A brief gleam passed over the other's face. 'It is not as bad as that,' she said, 'no, not quite. . . .'

Later, warm but wide-eyed in the dark Rhoda brooded on this fate so like, and yet so unlike her own: she cooked that delectable dinner too—yes, I know it. That old tyrant grudged the wine—she's probably a miser. Ludmilla's awful clothes . . . her hands—it's a scandal!

Next she realized that she had barely exchanged a word with her secretary since their arrival. The only thing that made her smile now was the thought of Mr. Ellis in the Duke's suite . . . Mr. Blair Ellis—as the Palazzo had so decisively bestowed a hyphen on him.

17. Ducal Disclosures

At eleven o'clock next morning the Duchess's boudoir proved to be a small high room hung with shabby maroon velvet, and furnished with a massive writing-desk, a number of filing cabinets, and two crimson leather chairs.

The Duchess had not yet arrived when the Contessina showed Mrs. Betterton-Best in—

On the writing-desk was a steaming coffee pot, and two cups and saucers. Seed catalogues from England and Holland and other countries were piled on the floor—but neatly. The room, although crammed, was orderly.

'Only a moment now,' Ludmilla whispered before leaving. 'Grand'mère is always punctual.'

And she was. By day the Duchess looked at once older, yet more alert. She wore a threadbare riding-coat with an immaculate white cravat, crisply adjusted, and an alarmingly short tweed skirt above yokel's gaiters—all these without suggesting male attire which Mrs. Betterton-Best thought quite a feat.

'Good morning, Madame,' the Duchess said with a touch of irony that her guest did not dislike. Her hostess was, in fact, much less ceremonious this morning . . . but then of course for the first time they were alone. 'I shall not ask how you have slept, for your eyes are clear, your skin fresh, and you look as the Almighty meant. Milk . . . sugar?'

'Both, please. What a mercy the rain has stopped.'

'Yes—I hope to take Mr. Blair Ellis over the farm this afternoon. But first of all let me say that it is quite impossible to thank you adequately for all you did for us at Monte Carlo. I shall not, however, forget—' she added briefly, and her listener had a convincing impression that she would not.

'To me,' the Duchess continued, 'it is simply grotesque that my brother did not once mention this man to his relatives. The likeness alone would have made it a matter of interest. But men are secretive from birth.'

'Well naturally,' Mrs. Betterton-Best laughed, 'for there *we* are—before them from the start, ready to do all and be all! Have a heart!'

Again a slight smile flickered across the Duchess's face before she drank her coffee.

'That is precisely what I want *you* to have,' she retorted. 'A heart. Monstrous as it may seem, I must trespass on your indulgence again—and beg a second favour.'

'My heart is all ears,' Mrs. Betterton-Best assured her.

'The suggestion that I should ask your help over the Pardo affair came first from my grand-daughter, who had heard her mother speak of you in Paris—and although she did not know your address, this has been one of the few intelligent ideas she has had. In June I made a second disastrous discovery, and again she suggested that there too you might help us. But I thought it wiser not to advise you of the second calamity, until the first was settled—' Wryly, the Duchess bowed to her guest, 'I felt there was a limit even to such kindness as I was already exacting.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best smiled, 'Now, that was most considerate, and here I am to help you—if I can.'

Acidly the Duchess said: 'The help is needed by my grand-daughter, but first I must inform you of certain details which, in a sense, lead up to this disgraceful situation. My daughter made a disastrous marriage, and spent the remainder of a brief life cooking and cleaning for an impoverished French professor in a garret in Paris. There she and her husband died within a week of each other during the influenza epidemic. Their daughter—Ludmilla—came to me at the age of fourteen. But I got her too late. Her character, through lack of early discipline remains adolescent to this day. Her tempera-

ment is of that tedious type forever mourning what is not. Nearing thirty years of age, she is still yearning for a parent! Farcical, but true. None of this, of course, is ever admitted, for she is senselessly evasive. Her intellectual capacity is nil, and although she is as romantic as a milkmaid, she has remained throughout apathetic to the glories of her mother's house—As a further break with our tradition, I discovered that she had been brought up by her father as a Protestant.'

Silently Mrs. Betterton-Best surveyed the Duchess. She was as much repelled by her clinical detachment, as by her betrayals. The woman must be completely insensible—

But she had underrated the other's acumen.

Abruptly the Duchess added: 'You wonder why I relate such details? Be good enough to note them, for each is relevant to the catastrophe that has occurred here—and in which I urge your help.'

Disconcerted by this mind-reading, Mrs. Betterton-Best could only say: 'Please go on'—with a calm she did not feel.

'My grand-daughter's education has been superficial—not at all what one would expect from a professorial background until the age of fourteen! She speaks three languages only—French, Italian, English, and in French alone is she adequate. She is, however, able to deal with my correspondence after a fashion, and she is certainly proficient in domestic matters. She has been my secretary now for about ten years, and has also attended to certain household details which has left me free to help my son with the affairs connected with our various estates. I need scarcely tell you that the problems connected with property today are enormously complicated. The war has flung the whole country out of gear. Politically and financially the situation alters weekly and—' her voice rasped with annoyance, 'the proletariat is less reliable than ever. Very well then, you will realize that, despite her limitations, how essential my grand-daughter is to me. And you can imagine my indignation when I discovered in June that she, an unmarried woman, is pregnant. Yes, at her age—a woman approaching thirty.'

'Good heavens!' and Mrs. Betterton-Best was indeed astounded. Yet, swifter than thought, an impression revived of that clumsy figure, and a certain roll in the Contessina's gait.

'The tail of the comet was evident in June,' the Duchess continued. 'To avoid scandal I am detained here when I ought to be in Venice—'

'But surely,' her guest was floundering now, 'they will marry—as matters have gone so far.'

'She refuses to name the man, but as she never leaves my house unattended, I am well aware that it must be one of three persons who stayed at the Palazzo since last December. The first man was a steward from my son's estate in Tuscany. The second was a German official from my property in Netze. The third,' the Duchess paused for a frigid second, 'was a guest and need not concern us further. He is the least likely.'

That's the one she suspects, and finds unforgivable, Mrs. Betterton-Best decided.

'It is, of course, out of the question that my grand-daughter marries any such person as those I have indicated. The child, if it lives, will have to be adopted by some suitable stranger. And in a country other than this. Illegitimate children, if male, can prove a source of trouble to any succession. It is not the first time that a ducal house has been embarrassed by the sluttish behaviour of one of its women. Nor will it be the last. Meantime, the situation has to be met, and secrecy is of vital importance. For my grand-daughter to enter a nursing-home here would be as dangerous as to engage help in some private apartment. There is no country in Europe where gossip is so rife as this of ours. And, in any case, during this period her services will be lost to me. But as soon as she has recovered, she must return. Here she is required—is indeed a vital necessity now that my staff has been reduced by half.'

'Return from where?' Mrs. Betterton-Best, chilled by this cynicism, spoke to conceal distaste rather than from curiosity.

'I have already completed the arrangements with Sir Edward Hallam in London.'

'London!' Mrs. Betterton-Best's consternation could not have been encouraging, but the Duchess, with an impatient nod, continued.

'London, naturally—as this is the matter in which I need

your help. She will have to spend at least two months in London before she enters the nursing-home, where Sir Edward has assured me the utmost privacy will be observed. For the same reason I cannot arrange London introductions for her. She will be amply provided for, but almost entirely alone—'

'Yes, yes, of course,' Mrs. Betterton-Best said hastily. 'Poor girl—I shall do everything possible to cheer her.'

'That,' the Duchess declared, 'is scarcely what she deserves, or what I desire. It is I who need consideration.'

Nettled now almost beyond endurance, Mrs. Betterton-Best dangerously inquired:

'Why, what have *you* done?'

The Duchess surveyed her for a second, and then thought better of annihilation. Icily she said:

'I have found her a gynaecologist, and arranged for various payments to be made through my solicitors there. What I require of you is to find her a suitable boarding-house for this period of waiting—s inexpensive as possible. I believe that such exist near Euston, or in Bloomsbury. And that from time to time you will be good enough to keep me informed.'

'Well, certainly—yes, of course,' Mrs. Betterton-Best again assured her. 'But let her stay with me for that period. There is a pleasant spare-room—' she interrupted herself. 'It seems a pity to waste money on a boarding-house.'

Irritably the Duchess said 'It is also important not to unsettle her. Residence in your doubtless delightful home might easily do this. But a period in a plain but respectable boarding-house will send her back more responsive to the benefits of her home.'

Mrs. Betterton-Best frowned. 'When do you intend her to arrive in London?'

'I intend her to leave with you tomorrow—if you will be good enough to permit this. I have to dupe a large circle of gossiping friends and relations. It would greatly simplify matters if I can say that Ludmilla has gone on holiday to England, with an old friend of the family—one recently my guest . . . that you have travelled back together. This will explain Ludmilla's unexpected departure.'

The neatness of this arrangement was only too plain, but Mrs. Betterton-Best was now equally business-like:

'In that case your grand-daughter must come to my house on arrival. She can then see how she likes it.'

'I thank you,' the other retorted, 'but her likes do not concern me. Despite the impression I am obliged to give our circle, this is *not* a holiday jaunt. It is an infernal nuisance, and an abominable expense.'

'May I remind you,' Mrs. Betterton-Best was now equally terse, 'that an inexpensive respectable hotel has first to be found. Presumably by me. Personally, I always feel like death in the two places you mention—suicide in Bloomsbury, murder in Euston. Perhaps your grand-daughter is better balanced. I shall certainly not enjoy my searches there. No, nor my visits later.'

'Enjoy?' the Duchess demanded. 'Who is talking of enjoyment.'

'I am,' Mrs. Betterton-Best's smile was glacial. 'And I must warn you that I never do anything without at least a degree of comfort and pleasure. It may take a week to find suitable accommodation—it may take longer. I am not to be hurried. If my London arrangements do not suit you, I must, alas, decline to assist further.'

For the first time, the Duchess looked at her cat's-paw less as a cypher than as a phenomenon presenting unwelcome possibilities.

'In that case,' she replied, 'she may remain a week with you. But you understand that privacy is essential.'

'I shall have to tell my secretary, of course.'

'The other rose impatiently. 'That's understood. Mr. Blair Ellis is at present in the library.'

But Mrs. Betterton-Best was too quick for her this time:

'Thank you—but I shall not discuss this with him till later in the day. I wish to give it further thought—'

And on her way back to her bedroom, she added silently: So, dear lady, concentrate on soils and manures this afternoon!

As she reached the bedroom door, the Contessina emerged from it with a feather-duster—

She started when she saw Mrs. Betterton-Best, blushed

violently, and then stood rigid with downcast eyes. In her defenceless humility there was something more august than in any pride.

'Ludmilla,' Rhoda said softly, 'you're coming to London with me. We'll see it through together. Don't worry—be as happy as you can.'

The other drew in a trembling breath, pressed Rhoda's hand without a word, and hurried blindly away.

Neither the Duchess nor Mr. Ellis appeared for luncheon—Luigi explained that they were enjoying a sandwich meal at the farm, and that the Contessina also begged to be excused—household matters intervened. . . .

Mrs. Betterton-Best ate an excellent meal by herself in the banquetting-hall, musing on Ludmilla's life. The girl's idealism also explained much, and her lonely existence with her grandmother. Rhoda, long familiar with solitude, knew how easy it might be to fit strangers into some desired role. Ludmilla had not only 'recognized' Rhoda, but the unknown Mr. Ellis. And what a life with that despot of a woman—not even a cheap hotel at Euston would reconcile Mrs. Betterton-Best to such a return!

Again she remembered Ludmilla's shining eyes when she quoted the Declaration of Arbroath on freedom. Why hadn't she cut away years ago? She could cook to perfection, she had three languages, she could teach . . . Was she simply as the Duchess implied a sentimentalist? Of course the longer one postponed a difficult step, the worse it became until sometimes paralysis was the result. Then, too, she had had no money, with which to take an initial plunge. And probably nobody cared to help her for fear of antagonizing the Duchess . . . And now she was in this horrible predicament—

Mrs. Betterton-Best spent the afternoon writing letters, and vowing that she would never again let her secretary out of her sight—should he ever return. Poor man—what a day he must be having, splashing through that swamp outside. . . .

She also sent a postcard to Mr. Simms, which she found among the Baldassare writing paper—of the Bridge of Sighs.

They were both well, she wrote, and looking forward to seeing him soon. The weather was atrocious and she had

never felt so cold. There was no place like home. This she underlined nostalgically—a fact noted by all at Cholmondeley Chambers, as the card, extravagantly over-stamped, remained a day on the baize board before Mr. Simms claimed it. James had already sent him his yearly card, and he had not expected this additional excitement. At the Chambers, betting was now fifty-fifty as to whether Mr. Ellis and his widow were married or not, but all were appeased by the admission that the Italian weather was atrocious. This would teach the rich not to spend their money abroad. What was wrong with Eastbourne, anyway? But this postcard was the first popular step Mrs. Betterton-Best had taken with Cholmondeley! Now at least the Chambers knew where the travellers were. It was an undoubted improvement on Mr. Ellis's San Remo card which as usual conveyed nothing but his regards and his initials.

At five o'clock Luigi informed her that it was now possible for her to have tea with Mr. Blair Ellis in the drawing-room . . . they would be alone.

Mr. Ellis, looking notably fresh, told her that he had had a most interesting day—and one yielding much valuable data.

'That's a remarkable woman,' he added.

Mrs. Betterton-Best barely concealed her impatience. 'That's an understatement,' she said and related the Contessina's story.

Mr. Ellis was startled, despite his varied experience at Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel's. He felt also a curious sense of disappointment on hearing of the Contessina's predicament, although, of course, it was no business of his. She was about the last person that he would have imagined in such a situation . . . there had been something about her that had put him in mind of white jasmine. He had noticed her rough hands, too, but unlike Mrs. Betterton-Best had admired these—recognizing her as a worker, like his own women-folk. He felt annoyance rather than pity now. It was not often, however, that he was mistaken in anyone.

With some severity he said: 'After all you have already done this is something of an imposition. You say that the Duchess intends to pay her grand-daughter's expenses—but

you are incurring a certain responsibility. The Contessina appears to be at least thirty years of age—and that's old enough for a first child.'

'Then she'll need my help the more,' was the prompt reply.

Judicially Mr. Ellis said: 'It remains an imposition. You'll have to give it more consideration.'

His attitude shocked Mrs. Betterton-Best—it was old-maidish and unlike him.

'It's a terrible position for her to be in,' she told him. 'My blood runs cold when I think of it. You and I must put ourselves in the Contessina's place—'

As this was more than Mr. Ellis knew to be possible in his case, he compressed his lips without reply. Never had he felt less inclined to entertain the fanciful.

If he's going to sulk, Mrs. Betterton-Best decided, it will be too bad! Ludmilla and I are going to have quite enough to contend with as it is. He must be shaken out of it—

Aloud she said: 'She is Prince Vicenza's niece, and I must look upon her as my own. I have already told her I will see her through. Besides—she may have been driven into this plight. Anyone who has been forced to live with the Duchess has my sympathy!'

To which Mr. Ellis outrageously replied: 'Mphm.'

It was Mrs. Betterton-Best's turn to be severe:

'Be very thankful, Mr. Blair Ellis, that we leave at cock-crow tomorrow! You've got off a great deal more easily than you perhaps realize. Another twenty-four hours and I swear that the Duchess would have ended by marrying you. . . .'

And at dinner that night their hostess certainly seemed in a much milder mood, although she trounced the British government for treachery. This evening the conversation had taken a political turn, but anything, Mrs. Betterton-Best felt, was livelier than soils and manures.

'Do not imagine,' the Duchess announced, 'that I excuse the Italian people for their failures. Our masses are supine, they lack system, and worship anyone who will enforce direction. They sense that this man Mussolini is more than a demagogue—he will *act*. And so, once more my wretched country will be thrown into upheaval. It is probably fortunate

for you that you leave tomorrow—travel may later be difficult.'

What a pity, Mrs. Betterton-Best suddenly thought, that Hugh Sondes isn't here. He and the Duchess would have been soul-mates in political pessimism—

She stole a glance at the Contessina, whose eyes were carefully lowered when not anxiously following the passage of the dishes to and fro—yet the meal was as excellent as it had been before. At the same time there was a suppressed excitement in Ludmilla's silence. She's afraid to betray relief, Mrs. Betterton-Best suspected. And she can't be expected to sing or play tonight. How on earth are we going to get through the rest of the evening?

That problem was solved in the drawing-room as they finished coffee.

Without warning the electric light went out, and each heater died.

The Contessina moaned, and the Duchess swore.

'Get the candles!' she ordered, adding to her guests: 'This has happened before—and no one here can deal with it until the electrician comes tomorrow. My staff today consists solely of bunglers.'

'Well, now,' Mr. Ellis said in that fatal way of his, 'perhaps I can help. . . .'

Lighted by the Contessina, who held a candle, he disappeared.

The drawing-room door was left ajar to allow another candle in the hall to brighten the room. The effect was that of a glow-worm lighting a cave.

In the darkness conversation languished between the Duchess and Mrs. Betterton-Best who, finally bored by the fulminations of her hostess, exclaimed:

'What a time Mr. Ellis is taking—I shall find out what has happened,' and she too vanished, seizing the candle in the hall as she passed it.

As Mrs. Betterton-Best also failed to return, the Duchess herself, for the first time in history, made her way to the kitchen basement . . . but not without difficulty as Mrs. Betterton-Best's depredation had plunged the hall and corridor in darkness.

Stumbling into the banqueting-hall, the Duchess lit and

removed a branched candlestick there. Then she proceeded downstairs, an aged and angry acolyte

At the end of a stone passage there, by the light of the Contessina's candle, and Mrs. Betterton-Best's, the Duchess saw Mr. Ellis mounted on a chair beneath a fuse-board. She recognized her four servants but not the crowd of relations and friends who were, apparently, spending the evening and possibly the night in her cellars. There were also two dogs, several cats, and an overpowering smell of goat which suggested that those of that tribe were also present in the shadows. All were grouped around Mr. Ellis with the upward gaze of worshippers at a shrine, and like so many of the faithful were proffering advice with praise—but at the astounding sight of the Duchess in her own basement, silence fell as at the clap of doom.

In the sudden hush the Duchess heard herself summoned by Mr. Ellis:

'That's a better light, and you're taller—stand closer. I find that there are no wooden pliers in the place, and what is more serious—no fuse wire.'

An unpleasant smell of burning rubber had now reached the Duchess, and with the utmost severity she said:

'You have all been an interminable time. Either this can be done, or it can't. What is the explanation?'

Calmly Mr. Ellis replied: 'A wee thing higher with your light, please. The explanation is that I have had to secure some lighting flex from what I hear is an old pendant. From this I have drawn some strands for my fuse wiring. It has also taken time to find, then fix the adhesive tape—'

'And it's a miracle,' Mrs. Betterton-Best interrupted, 'that Mr. Ellis has not been electrocuted. I shan't draw an easy breath till he's down from that chair. Can't you send some of these people away—for I fear they'll knock him off it.'

In the stampede that followed the Duchess's word of command, this indeed almost happened.

'Keep it steady, keep it steady!' Mr. Ellis adjured the Duchess with unusual testiness, his one concern the light she held. So absorbed was he in his intricate task with the burnt up fuse-board that he was completely unaware that the silence of the Duchess, the Contessina, and Mrs. Betterton-Best,

grouped around him, was now portentous as that of the three fates.

Finally he announced: 'That's done it, I should say.'

The next instant, the far end of the passage and elsewhere sprang into light, and from above and below stairs came cries of ecstasy. 'Miracoloso!' The entire Palazzo was vociferous with delight.

Mr. Ellis alone remained unclated by his feat. Before stepping from his chair he remembered those notable economies demonstrated on the farm that afternoon—all of them admirable. Money too had been expended there where it was needed

As he stepped down from the chair he said to the Duchess: 'I'd like a word alone with you.'

'But certainly,' she was somewhat astonished. 'You may speak now.'

'No,' he shook his head, 'I'd prefer to see you alone.'

'Why, of course!' and Mrs. Betterton-Best with her hand on Ludmilla's arm steered her away.

In the vaulted seclusion of the stone passage which despite the summer season was trickling with water, Mr. Ellis said, with another shake of his head: 'I'm sorry to have to say it—you're luckier than you realize.'

'Not at all,' the Duchess replied, 'I am much indebted to you, and fully realize this.'

'No,' he told her, 'I'm sorry to be personal, but now that we're alone, I may as well say that I don't like the situation here at all. I've got the future in mind for you. It's plain to see that your connections have always been a menace, and now you are a danger to yourself and others.'

The Duchess stared at him. 'Have you gone out of your mind?' she demanded. 'It is one thing to render help in a domestic matter, and another to criticize my relatives, *and* my personal attitude—'

Charitably Mr. Ellis put her confusion down to age. 'I've done nothing,' he assured her, 'but tide you over till tomorrow. But make no mistake about it, you'll have to turn over a new leaf here. Not to mince matters, your jointing system's wicked, and it's a wonder to me that you haven't been burnt to a cinder long ago.'

'Mr. Blair Ellis,' the Duchess said between her teeth, in fact with biting clarity, 'I flattered myself that I was at home with colloquial English. It seems I was mistaken. Of what are you speaking?'

Mr. Ellis pointed to the fuse-board. 'Of that contraption there. I've never seen its like. You'll be well advised to employ a qualified electrician next time.' In all simplicity he added: 'It's cheaper in the end.'

To his surprise, after a second's silence, the Duchess gave a stentorian laugh. It was more of a bark than a guffaw, but it remained recognizable.

'Sir,' she said, 'your advice shall be followed,' and laughed again to the consternation of her servants at the end of the passage, and of the Contessina awaiting anxiously at the top of the stairs. . . .

Mrs. Betterton-Best missed the merriment.

She had regained her chilly suite, where she was busily engaged in turning on every available light and heater.

'I must have a hot bath at last,' she muttered, 'even if it turns me as green as grass.'

Behind the mosaic walls she could hear the rats, the baroque rats of Baldassare galumphing brazenly.

'I shall leave this hellish place tomorrow,' she vowed, 'yes, if I have to walk out of it naked. . . .'

18. Three Travel

Shortly after noon next day, seated in a reserved compartment, as their train left Venice Rhoda remembered that she had once travelled to Monte Carlo for what amounted to a two-minute visit, but never had she expected to leave Venice after a sixty-seconds' one.

Ardently Ludmilla responded to her smile. Mr. Ellis acknowledged it with more reserve. He still disapproved of the present plans.

The Contessina for once was elegantly dressed—but as if for a trip to the Pole. Uncle Charles, she whispered to Mrs. Betterton-Best, had given her this sable toque and the long, sable-cuffed coat. To the irreverent Rhoda, whenever she looked at her, she dramatically evoked Anna Karenina at the wrong time of year, but Mr. Ellis secretly thought the garb stylish. Yet he also feared that she would be very hot by the time they reached Dover—for already the July sun was blazing again.

'Ah!' the Contessina exclaimed, as the station was left behind, 'how happy I am to be with you both! From the beginning I had an imperative conviction that we are meant for each other—we three. And later also, you will find that I can be useful at the Villa. Yes indeed!'

Tactfully Rhoda refrained from glancing at Mr. Ellis. Instead: 'Just relax,' she advised Ludmilla, 'and enjoy yourself as much as you can.' She was now rather annoyed by his

stiff attitude to the Contessina. It was only too plain that he thought gaiety unsuitable in a sinner. Rhoda found it spirited, and was thankful when the exhausted Ludmilla fell asleep in her corner.

By the time all three were seated in the dining-car years seemed to have dropped from the Contessina, and the delight she manifested at each detail, every episode of their meal, would have softened any heart except, apparently, Mr. Ellis's. Rhoda felt she was renewing her own youth in this enthusiasm.

They reached Milan at half past four, and later when the Paris train drew out with them, she was somewhat surprised by a request from Ludmilla for a word alone with her—after they should leave Brig.

'But that won't be till about eight-thirty—why not now?'

'You are very kind,' Ludmilla said softly, 'but after Brig will be better.'

And the frontier crossed at eight-thirty-seven, Mr. Ellis found himself patrolling the corridor alone. . .

In their compartment the Contessina was confessing to Mrs. Betterton-Best:

'Again I must throw myself on your mercy and beseech forgiveness. I had to wait till Brig—you might have felt you had to send me back. Now, you cannot blame yourself. I have deceived you—but then I could not get away unless I did. You must forgive me—I implore it! I am not going to have a child. I have been ill for many months. It is a growth. But had I told grand'mère, the operation would then have taken place in Venice. I should not have got away. This was the only way—'

Dumbfounded, Mrs. Betterton-Best could only stammer: 'But Ludmilla, are you—can you be sure it is not . . . not the other?'

Ludmilla bit her lip, and turned aside. 'Quite sure, . . . Never have I been loved by any man in that way.'

'Forgive me,' Rhoda's confusion was complete, 'how dreadful of me to say such a thing! For a moment I scarcely knew what to think. And a growth is such a serious matter—'

'No, no,' urgently the other interrupted, 'do not distress yourself. Perhaps not so serious. My father's sister had this experience—there was an operation, she recovered. Sir Edward Hallam will know at once. It will be of a simplicity.

Grand'mère must pay for an operation instead—' for the first time anger sharpened her voice, 'I have earned it.'

'She may wish you to return to Venice for the operation.'

'No. Once I am in London she will wish it over as speedily as possible—so that I may the quicker return. But,' she paused, and apprehensively gazed at her hostess, 'I shall not return.'

Hastily Rhoda said: 'You shall do nothing that you do not wish to do. Don't worry about that now. It will solve itself as we go along.'

'It is a step I should have taken long ago.'

Rhoda nodded. 'But such a step is not easy. It takes courage.'

'Yes,' Ludmilla said simply, 'and as well I lacked money. But with this arrangement, grand'mère will pay—and I have found the courage. Later in London I can teach, or I can cook . . . people will always need to eat. Now, please, I do implore you—let Mr. Ellis know at once, for since my disgrace he has thought ill of me. May I tell him now that you wish to speak alone with him?'

Her anxiety was almost child-like, but before Mrs. Betterton-Best could reassure her, Mr. Ellis himself opened the compartment door—

'Please come,' the Contessina rose, 'Mrs. Betterton-Best has something to relate—while I take a little promenade.'

It was not the first time that both had noticed a certain authority in her simplicity.

Five minutes later Mr. Ellis knew the truth, and was at once relieved and shocked by the Contessina's duplicity. He took refuge in the fact that his client (for so he regarded Mrs. Betterton-Best) must be his first consideration.

'I don't like it,' he said. 'I don't like it at all. She must have been almost demented to take such a step. The Italians, of course, are known for subtlety—'

'Subtlety?' Mrs. Betterton-Best exclaimed, 'the creature's almost simple-minded to have stood that despot so long.'

'The fact remains,' Mr. Ellis insisted, 'that this is now an illness that she is suffering from. I must indicate the possibilities involved. She may have an operation, and she may die. This is not a natural process, as we thought.'

But Mrs. Betterton-Best was remembering: *then* he behaved like an old maid, now he's as ominous as a midwife.

'I mean to believe in her recovery,' she said. 'She's survived life with the Duchess for fifteen years—she must be as strong as a horse—'

The Contessina had opened the compartment door. She looked almost as pale as the first time they met, and glanced swiftly from one to the other, 'Am I forgiven?' she asked Mrs. Betterton-Best.

'Of course you are,' Rhoda said, 'I don't see what else you could possibly have done—under the circumstances. We are both so sorry for all you have suffered. Mr. Ellis is ready to welcome you too. In Gaelic,' she prompted swiftly.

Mr. Ellis dropped his gaze, and automatically repeated: 'Ceud Mille Fàilte.'

Reverently the Contessina said: 'How very beautiful. What does it mean?'

Mr. Ellis frowned, and reluctantly announced: 'A hundred thousand welcomes.'

In reply the Contessina held out simultaneously her right hand to Mrs. Betterton Best and her left to him: 'My benefactors!' and her white face was radiant, 'I thank you—and I shall love you till I die.'

Both her friends looked less exhilarated by this assurance than she had expected—in fact Mr. Ellis left the compartment at once. But Mrs. Betterton-Best kissed her:

'We shall have to get the best medical advice possible . . . no doubt Sir Edward Hallam will guide us.'

'Nothing is further from my mind at present,' the Contessina told her. 'In everything I follow *your* prescription—to relax, and to be joyful.'

Next day Mr. Ellis found her exuberance just as disconcerting. He had much preferred the subdued Cinderella of the Palazzo Baldassare—

When they reached the Villa about five o'clock, with the shadow of leaves fanning idly on the sunlit pillars of the gateway—she had exclaimed: 'The Sphinx!' as if that image represented salvation.

Then, standing in the centre hall—on the imperial Chinese carpet, she had raised her eyes to the distant dome of the house, her face transformed by smiles, tears coursing down her cheeks, her hands uplifted in praise . . . She was too much for Mr.

Ellis. She was beyond reason. There was something foreign about her. . . .

After dinner that night when the Hislops had gone into the garden, and the three were alone again, the Contessina addressed him directly:

'Now that we have arrived, I hope you will call me Ludmilla, as Mrs. Betterton-Best does.'

Hastily Mr. Ellis said: 'I doubt that would scarcely be suitable.'

'Perhaps then,' the Contessina ventured, 'you like my second name better—Bathildis?'

Firmly Mrs. Betterton-Best said: 'I think that Ludmilla is easier, and that it is a very good idea. After all, we three have been through quite a lot together lately—we're scarcely strangers. I hope you will both call me Rhoda. Mr. Ellis, may we call you James—or Ellis?'

'Ellis,' he answered, 'by all means.'

Rhoda gave him a little wink. 'He prefers us as colleagues, Ludmilla. The Scots have to be wooed and won—'

'Ellis,' Ludmilla repeated slowly, 'yes, I like that too, Rhoda. It is musical.'

It was also, Mr. Ellis perceived, the thin edge of the wedge. He no longer felt, as he had done at Baldassare, at home with her.

Yet the Hislops, who were remaining for August, took to her at once, foreign and all. So did Horace Simms. That first week she gaily made sponge cakes with Hetty (anything heavier was forbidden by her hostess) ate these with Horace, and daily accompanied Henry's oboe on the Bechstein grand. Her surgeon's immediate decision to operate scarcely seemed to trouble her. Periodically, Mr. Ellis noted critically, she went into ecstasies over everything, including the first modern kitchen she had seen. But the skin of her smiling face had a grey look at times. Fey was the word for her—and it was to be hoped that she would simmer down before that operation.

Apparently the surgeon, appointed by Sir Edward Hallam, thought so too, for in a few days' time she was gathered into a nursing home—to rest for a week before the operation was due. It was, however, Mr. Ellis who insisted that Sir Edward

Hallam wrote a full account at once to the Duchess, before this transfer took place. . . .

The day before the operation only one visitor was allowed at a time. Mrs. Betterton-Best saw her in the afternoon but asked Mr. Ellis to take some flowers in the evening. 'It will shorten the night for her,' she explained.

He had visited the Contessina at the home before, with the Hislops, but entered the bedroom alone now somewhat apprehensively, with the roses.

The Contessina was lying back on her pillows attired, although he did not know this, in one of Mrs. Betterton-Best's most alluring bed-jackets. Its rosy frills prinked with satin bows presented an intricacy that further confused him. Her dark hair, tonight, lay in a loose school-girl plait over one shoulder, and she had cut a small fringe across her brow— It was not quite straight which added to its charm. She was paler than when last he saw her, and after greetings had been exchanged, and the flowers deposited, he observed as he sat down:

'I doubt you'll have quite a bit on your mind tonight.'

'Yes,' she said simply, 'but my surgeon is of good hope. Perhaps Mr. Ellis, you will remember me in your prayers tomorrow morning—I am a Protestant.'

His heart smote him somewhat at the formality of the mister, and rather reproachfully he said: 'It would have made no difference had you been a Catholic. I'm not as narrow as that.'

Diffidently she added: 'I feel you to be of stern conviction. You will remember tomorrow?'

Hastily he said: 'I will remember . . . We will all be thinking of you.'

She turned on her elbow and looked at him with those lustrous, disturbing eyes: 'Was there,' she asked, 'a hill behind your home in Scotland, a big, bare hill down which you used to run at night, to the lighted door?'

'There was that,' he agreed. 'It was a small stone house of two storeys and faced due south. The smell of bog-myrtle drenched you as you ran.'

'In London you would often long for that?'

Cautiously he agreed, 'On and off.'

Kindling, she smiled, 'Sometimes you would dream of it

perhaps—the stone house in the darkness bright with light . . . home?’

‘Off and on,’ grudgingly he admitted it.

‘I too know that country,’ she told him, ‘in both word and dream. The great Italian Ariosto has written: *Scotland rises on the border of the world*, and there too I read, as if it were another book of revelation: *I saw between the two unicorns, a great Lion who bears a sword of silver in his paw: that is the banner of the Kings of Scots.*’

Touched despite himself he said: ‘You’ll have to go north yourself one day.’

‘Is it true,’ she asked, ‘that in the summer there, one can scarcely tell twilight from dawn?’

Mr. Ellis nodded. ‘It is true enough of the long white summer nights.’

Abruptly she lay back on her pillows: ‘I cannot conceal from myself that I may not recover.’

Hurriedly Mr. Ellis said, ‘You must not talk like that. No, it’s the wrong attitude. You have a fine surgeon— You must go forward hopefully.’

Firmly she said: ‘I may not recover, so I would like to give you a small souvenir. In remembrance of your kindness. For you have been very kind—although at times,’ she paused, ‘you have not always approved.’

‘Now, now,’ Mr. Ellis said, ‘that’s all over and done. I had to advise Mrs. Betterton-Best as well as I could. Put the past behind.’

‘Thank you,’ she said softly, ‘I rejoice to hear those words. Here is my little gift—’ she lifted a small velvet case from the bedside table.

‘But you’re not going to die,’ he protested.

‘I might,’ she said with determination, ‘but whatever befalls, you will keep this memento. It is my father’s signet-ring.’

Mr. Ellis paled. Every implication of a ring, legal and romantic alike, rushed to him in warning. He was aghast.

‘But I cannot,’ he began, ‘accept anything so valuable—it’s impossible.’

Sweetly she smiled at the ring which she had withdrawn from its case. ‘It is of no great monetary value—its worth resides in its sentiment.’ She looked up at Mr. Ellis. ‘I have none

but you and Rhoda now—this ring would be useless to her. I am leaving her my diamond brooch. Please put the ring on—I hope it fits—’

The quiet note of authority which he had heard before in her voice was evident now. His wild uncertainty was no match for it. It was the worst predicament of his life—

He took the ring—then hesitated for another reason. He had seen signet-rings worn on either hand and different fingers—but there must be a correct position for this. Mr. Franklyn and Mr. Steel had always worn theirs on the last finger of the left hand.

He slipped the ring on.

Delightedly she exclaimed: ‘It fits—you see it is meant for you!’

All Mr. Ellis’s anxieties returned multiplied. Evasively he said: ‘I’ll retain it for the present—until you leave the home.’

‘No, no,’ she cried, ‘it is a gift—you cannot return a gift! I honour this ring—it was my father’s. How can you treat it like this? No welcome! Yet see how well it looks on your fine hand, for you have fine hands, Mr. Ellis. I noticed them at once at Baldassare. They are the hands of a musician—’

Mr. Ellis shook his head. ‘I’m sorry to seem boorish. I know the ring is valuable—sentiment and all. But it seems to me that I am the last man who should receive it.’

‘What a fuss,’ she said softly, ‘to make over a small souvenir! You have brought me flowers tonight. Think of the ring as a flower—do not take the bloom from it in this fashion.’

Mr. Ellis glanced away—he perceived himself afresh for the mundane soul he was.

‘And if I die,’ she continued with a little sigh, ‘think how you will blame yourself that my last hours were not happy—’ again her lustrous gaze sought his.

Mr. Ellis, who felt he could not avert much more said quickly: ‘Right enough, this is no way for us to be arguing tonight. You must rest now.’ He arose, doubtful if he should shake hands or not, and added: ‘Well, I’ll wish you a sound sleep—’

‘And I will wish you the same,’ she replied politely, but no longer looked at him. ‘Thank Rhoda for the roses,’ she added.

‘I will tell her,’ he assured her, turning away.

As he reached the safety of the door, he heard her say in a very different tone of voice—weak now, as if all the fey vitality had gone out of her:

‘Why are you so *alarmed*? Whether I live or die a signet-ring is not a betrothal ring. No one else knows of it.’

For a second they stared at each other. Her courage bereft him of words at first.

‘Ludmilla,’ he protested, and in prolonging the name it became a story in itself, eloquent of his inadequacy, ‘forgive me.’

She turned away her head. Briefly she said: ‘Goodbye.’

‘No!’ suddenly he stood his ground at the door. ‘Don’t say goodbye—say goodnight.’

She did not look round. ‘Goodnight,’ she said coldly.

‘Goodnight, what?’ he insisted.

At that she turned, her smile swift:

‘Goodnight, James Blair Ellis,’ she challenged, and her irony might have been that of his grandmother at Croft Knock.

For a minute he felt completely at home with her—

Without pausing to think, he stepped back to the bed, and kissed her hand—his exit for once that of sober grace. . . .

Curiously moved, he walked all the way back to the Villa. She was both mysterious and simple—he could not get over her. The summer night was momentarily still. The scent of geraniums from the London window-boxes hung pungent, defeating the roadway’s melting tar. The stars, lost above him, continued to waver as he watched them, in wild witchery. . . .

There must be twenty years difference in our ages, he was reflecting grimly. It’s ridiculous. Mid-summer madness. Well, no one need ever know I love her. But for all that, I doubt she’s got me—dead or alive. . . .

At the Villa that evening, Rhoda could think of nothing but tomorrow’s operation. She had seen the surgeon and doctor that afternoon. Both were sanguine. But the day had been oppressive, the garden was listless for lack of rain, and a nameless suspense seemed to brood.

For the first time doubt as to the outcome of the illness invaded her.

She had taken refuge in the summer-house where Hugh had once proposed, and where in May this year she had been forced

to identify the Sphinx on the parapet with the boiler. She heartily disliked this summer-house, but as it gave upon gravel it was always freer of midges than the other two—

If anything happened to Ludmilla, she did not know what she would do . . . it was almost incredible how she was missing her already. She was such a companionable darling. Rhoda could not imagine life without her now—and her adoration of everyone and everything at the Villa. Ludmilla even doted on the Sphinx!

Rhoda gazed up at it.

If only she recovers, she vowed, I'll be a different woman. Yes, I will. I'll actually write to Hugh and invite him back to dinner . . . I swear it!

There were some people one liked much better present than absent. Regrettably Hugh was of that number who are more attractive absent, and who acquire a faintly hypnotic aura then. She found herself constantly reminded of his finer qualities, despite that final revelation when he had sung for his supper with a hymn of hate. It would mean eating humble-pie on her part to send that invitation, but she would do it—

In its methodical way, and without comment, the Sphinx continued to stare into the stars . . .

19. London Tryst

The Contessina remained on the danger-list for two days, while that long-remembered August thunder-storm built itself up without breaking . . . and the occupants of the Villa passed silently in and out.

A harassed Mr. Ellis suggested that perhaps the Duchess should be telegraphed . . . she might wish to come—

'Do you wish to *kill* Ludmilla?' Rhoda demanded, her nerves at breaking-point.

The Duchess was dropped . . . and the Sphinx continued to gaze blankly into a brooding sky.

Late that afternoon the thunder-storm broke over London—the worst summer storm in living memory, torrential rain followed, and a fine mist rose from baking asphalt until the water bounding in the gutters swept heat away in flood—

At six o'clock Rhoda returned from the nursing-home. No one at the Villa had seen her both radiant and tremulous before. Ludmilla was better—the laboratory tests were also through, and each was satisfactory. Now it was only a matter of time and care. She had given Ludmilla love from all . . .

The Villa awoke to life and thanksgiving. The doors were left wide to welcome that fresh evening air . . . Horace Simms called for the third time that day. There was eager conversation and laughter again. Henry played his oboe each time he sat down—for once Hetty refrained from chiding. For the first time that week at dinner, everyone ate heartily. Another re-

assuring telephone bulletin came from the nursing-home at nine o'clock. After that, tea and coffee sessions were held until all hours—

A delightful alfresco feeling prevailed, and Mr. Ellis telephoned Cholmondeley Chambers to say that Mrs. Betterton-Best wished Mr. Simms to spend the night at the Villa. The Contessina, he added to Mr. Muspratt's complete mystification, had mercifully recovered. Mr. Muspratt who knew perfectly well that Mr. Ellis could take a stiff whisky on New Year's eve, without appreciably warming, found Mr. Ellis's manner suspiciously jovial. The Chambers were also exasperated. Mr. Simms had never mentioned any Contessina—and now here he was, of all people, spending the night there, after her merciful recovery! What the dickens was going on in that place? It was felt by Mr. Muspratt also, that Mr. Wother-spoon's help should be enlisted. Someone of standing, who could not be brushed-off, should have it out with Mr. Simms on his return. . . .

Next morning, while Mr. Simms was still at the Villa, and sharing breakfast with Mr. Ellis in Marco's sitting-room, destiny presented Mr. Ellis with the most astounding surprise of his life.

By first post he received a letter from Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel—he recognized the envelope at a glance, and presumed it dealt with Speldarch Waters arrangements for next September.

But the letter was written by hand, and from none other than George Dent himself . . . for Mr. Ellis as usual turned first to the signature. He wondered very much what this gentleman had to say for himself now—as the letter was a long one.

'He'll learn,' Mr. Steel had said, 'with time—but not at my expense or yours, I hope!' His uncle, of course, had no idea how the practice was going to suffer during Mr. George's education. . . .

Mr. Ellis read the letter through twice before he permitted himself fully to accept the contents.

He was amazed.

'Well, I'm blessed,' he laid down the letter and gazed at Horace, as if it were he who had astonished him. 'It's from George Dent, who's taken Mr. Steel's place at the Office—a

very frank and friendly communication. Handsome, indeed. In fact I can't get over it. He wants me to come back to the London office in September. Urges this, as they seem to be in some confusion. He makes it quite clear that the appointment will be permanent. 'Pon my soul,' and Mr. Ellis took up the letter again, 'I can't think what can have happened there to have induced this change of heart so *soon*—it's not three months since I left.'

'I can,' Horace said simply, 'he's discovered that you're the backbone of the practice—he's brighter than we thought.'

'I must say,' and Mr. Ellis shook his head enjoyably, 'I never expected anything as handsome as this letter.'

'What about that Cresswell woman?'

'She's gone—dismissed in one month by Mr. George for insubordination. Sacked, is the word he uses—' Mr. Ellis adjusted his spectacles the better to confirm. 'Well now . . . Mr. Steel will be almost as astonished as I am—' and he looked across at Horace, his expression a mixture of deprecation and delight, 'but do you know, I've a feeling I may suit Mr. George quite well after all. . . .'

Rhoda was delighted with his news. 'But you'll stay on at the Villa just the same—you won't desert Ludmilla and me, will you, in your triumph?'

And Mr. Ellis had agreed to remain—for the present.

Then she exclaimed: 'What wily old boys those senior partners have been—they have simply sat back, and let the situation declare itself. That's why they got you out in May, of course, to avoid friction, and to demonstrate the need of you as soon as possible!'

Mr. Ellis was as stunned by this idea, as by her ingenuity.

Was it conceivable that this was what they'd done? Cleared the coast for Mr. George, and given the young horse his head—right into the open sea? Certainly nothing was more sobering for a runaway than that.

And with his pleasure there mingled another satisfaction—the vindication of Franklyn, Frobisher and Steel's time-honoured acumen.

The first thing that he did on this day of days was to go out and send the Contessina carnations from a florist in Baker Street. Later in the week he sent some grapes. He did not re-

turn to the nursing-home. These offerings were all he was equal to. . . .

On her return a fortnight later, looking surprisingly well, he became increasingly nervous.

To his intense relief he saw very little of her for some days. When he did, she seemed much more subdued in manner—sweet and smiling still, but not in the least sentimental.

This renewed his confidence. It was plain that nothing more was expected of him. In fact, so calm and cool was she that shortly he found himself wondering if she had noticed that he was still wearing the ring.

The Hislops went home, ready to come again in any emergency. It was the best holiday they had had in years, they said. . . .

Things settled down very nicely to Mr. Ellis's way of thinking, for the last fortnight of his holiday, with Horace dotting in and out from time to time.

The Contessina, he noticed, had some new clothes—simple yet smart like Mrs. Bette 'ton-Best's . . . he couldn't think why more women didn't dress like that. He admired these new frocks. The Contessina's pale skin had now more tan from this London garden than it had ever known indoors in Italy. Sometimes he thought she was avoiding him. He knew now that he was quite safe. At the same time, he found this change in her a bit unexpected. . . .

Then Rhoda fulfilled her vow to the Sphinx, and Hugh Sondes came to dinner. . . .

Everything altered after that, in the most drastic and unforeseen fashion, although no one blamed Mr. Sondes at first.

On the contrary, Mr. Ellis and the Contessina were both charmed by him. Rhoda too was delighted for, as they said goodnight alone, he had made her what surely amounted to a playful apology:

'Now that your creature comforts appear to be permanent once more, my last hope fades.'

'Of what?' she asked.

'Of rescuing you for life from some Kensington home from home!'

'Dear Hugh,' she smiled, 'thank you for taking the sting out of the dragon's tail!'

It had been a thoroughly successful evening. . . .

To his sister Millicent next day, Sondes said:

'Rhoda has adopted a man of about fifty years of age—he might be a little younger—and a woman nearing thirty. No relation to each other or to her. And they are now living at the Villa in complete concord.'

'No!' Millicent was appalled and exhilarated. 'But I always thought Rhoda the most conventional creature.'

'That is certainly one of her masks.'

'A man of fifty—Hugh, you don't think that there's more to it than concord?'

'My dear Millicent, he is the pink of propriety—looks like an Edinburgh lawyer, and I gather is attached to some legal firm in the city here. He is attending to some of Marco's duties as a hobby. As for the girl—and there is something girl-like about her in spite of her age—she is the grand-daughter of the Duchess of Zollfeld and Veit, to whose Venetian Palazzo she has declined to return.'

'Good heavens, how did Rhoda come to be mixed up with that family?'

Sondes perceived that he would have to be careful. Millicent could root like a terrier when in the mood.

'Oh, Rhoda probably met the Duchess during one of her slumming phases . . . or perhaps sunning at Sorrento.'

'Don't be absurd, Hugh. I've always thought it rather odd that all those years we've known Rhoda, she's never once visited Italy.'

'Nonsense—Rhoda's been everywhere.'

'No, I asked her once why she didn't make a change, and have a holiday in Italy, and she replied: 'Italy would be too hot for me.'''

Imperceptibly Sondes smiled.

'Which is ridiculous,' Millicent pursued, 'for a woman who has sizzled in France, frizzled in Egypt and Spain—to say nothing of South America.'

Sondes frowned. 'That was when her husband died.'

Millicent hesitated. 'Yes, poor thing—so it was! I must say that was the only time she seemed human. And, of course, she's spent most of her life alone since. Hugh, I do admire her—sometimes I even like her, though I wish she didn't behave with the poise of a plaster saint.'

'Well, she's now a living idol, with two devotees worshipping visibly. Admittedly the Edinburgh lawyer's admiration is tacit, but none the less impressive. The Contessina openly adores.'

'I'd be much fonder of her too, Hugh, if I knew more about her.'

'Well, I wouldn't,' he said tersely, 'so let's leave it there.'

'Pooh!' Millicent exclaimed, 'just like a man—so lazy. I'd give quite a bit to know what the link with the Duchess is. I feel in my bones it might explain a great deal we have never known. I think I'll call.'

'For over twelve years, Millicent, you've dispensed with that formality. Don't be naïve now. What you will discover will only incense you—and it is all you will discover. Rhoda's guests spend their time in daily adoration. Later on, the Contessina is going to help with the cooking.'

'You're not serious?'

'I am,' he said wryly. 'And I understand that the Contessina is a superb cook.'

'Good lord,' Millicent † stared, 'what luck Rhoda always has! She'll never leave the museum now.'

'Until they quarrel . . . let us wait in charity and hope till then.'

There was a second's silence, and then Millicent tried again:

'You know, Hugh, I'm always surprised that Rhoda has never told you more—about herself, I mean.'

'Ah, she knew I would tell you.'

Millicent shook her head. 'How little she knows you,' she said simply, and his conscience pricked.

'As a matter of fact,' he volunteered, 'I find the Contessina rather appealing. She's quite a fine musician too. I hope to see more of her . . . so please don't upset Rhoda by calling.'

Millicent shot him a keen look, and elaborately changed the conversation. Busily she was thinking: What could be better for Hugh at his time of life . . . the grand-daughter of the Duchess of Zollfeld, and a good cook. A most suitable match.

...

Two weeks later this idea had also occurred forcibly and unpleasantly to Mr. Ellis and Rhoda, for Mr. Sondes was now calling with and without invitation. He was almost as regular in attendance as Mr. Simms, with whom he had struck up an

agreeable garden-acquaintance. Unfortunately Mr. Sondes did not confine himself to the summer-house. He entered the Villa with books, he left interesting periodicals, he brought music for Ludmilla. Gusts of laughter could be heard constantly from her chair and his on the terrace.

It was only too obvious that the convalescent was now blooming afresh, and both Mr. Ellis and Rhoda found themselves increasingly disturbed.

Mr. Ellis became unexpectedly morose, when he reflected that Mr. Sondes must be at least fifty—possibly more.

Rhoda, for her part, grew steadily more flippant.

Ludmilla's dreaminess proved undeniable, and Rhoda was at last forced to realize: three Cinderellas, Ellis, Ludmilla and myself—and only one slightly acid Prince Charming in the shape of Hugh . . . too bad!

The servants, noting these fluctuations in temperature, nodded, and drew their own conclusions.

The August heat although less intense than July's, was still beyond normal on that night in which the climax came.

It was growing late, and Rhoda stood alone at the open drawing-room window. To the west in the pale blue sky, fast thickening again with this fume of warmth, the moon in its first quarter smouldered, and gave off a sense of sultry unease that seemed to declare an entire century. Yet she knew that as the night darkened, its crescent would burn more clearly and again revive primordial calm.

But annoyance, it seemed, was to have the last word with her for at this moment she heard Hugh's footsteps on the stone flags outside. He had returned unexpectedly—having earlier left the Villa at nine o'clock, his only excuse on that occasion being a dozen fresh eggs sent by his sister from Marlborough.

Rhoda, who saw him approach now, went herself to the front door.

'I'm sorry,' she smiled, 'that your little friend can't come out again to play tonight. She's gone to bed.'

Briefly he said: 'It is you I wish to see.'

'Why, what's wrong?'

'A great deal,' he said, and followed her into the drawing-room.

He looks pompous, she thought, can he be going to ask me

for Ludmilla's hand in marriage? Really, I quite hate him. He's taken me off my guard—

'Won't you sit down?' she suggested.

'No,' he said, 'I prefer to stand. I once asked you to marry me. I ask you again now—for the last time.'

She was astounded. 'You can't be serious?'

'Yes—and as you're still my obsession, I'm even willing to sacrifice myself to yours . . . this damn house.'

Feebly she smiled, 'But, Hugh, it would kill us to marry each other—we're too alike.'

'I share your fear—though not the reason—so let us die together. It will be a change in your sunny cycle to cheer the cheerless, for I warn you that you will never succeed in my case.'

Weakly she laughed, 'You're scarcely gracious.'

'I feel ungracious. You owe me something you can never repay—ten years of life. The last of our best too . . . and I shall never forgive you.'

Despite herself, she was silent for a second, and then to her own surprise held out her hands to him:

'Couldn't you try to forgive?'

He ignored the outstretched hands. 'No,' he retorted. 'Be good enough to answer my question.'

She drew in a quick breath. 'I'm sorry to seem reluctant—After all, we've been friends for years . . . so perhaps—'

'One moment,' he said sharply, 'although I am willing to share this museum with you. I must warn you that, like Lord Brompton's butler, I decline to sleep downstairs. Do I make myself quite clear?'

She gave a gasp, 'Yes . . . you do,' and as he still maintained his uncompromising silence, she added: 'Thank you, Hugh, I will marry you . . . and perhaps when I get more accustomed to the idea I shall surprise you.'

Calmly he said, 'It will be nothing to the way in which I shall yet surprise you.'

She began to laugh again, and hoped it was not hysteria. 'Aren't you going to kiss me? It is usual.'

'I don't think so,' he replied. 'It would be very unusual for me—although after marriage I may feel more affectionate.'

To control her mirth she covered her face with her hands,

but as she sank back on the sofa he was astonished to see tears pouring through her fingers. He had never witnessed such a sudden flood before, and stood for a second, shocked.

Then a suspicion seized him as he sat down beside her. Jealously he demanded:

‘What’s all this about—for whom are you weeping?’

With perfect truth, and another convulsive gasp, she whispered: ‘Myself!’

20. Georgian Afternoon

Eagerly Rhoda assured Ludmilla and Mr. Ellis next day:

'This won't make the slightest difference to either of you! Why, it would ruin my marriage if you deserted me now . . . think of being left alone with Hugh and the boiler! You've seen for yourselves how helpless he is—he can't even open a bottle of champagne . . . quite incompetent when it comes to the realities. I shall need you both as never before.'

But her two guests, seated alone now in Horace's summer-house, after Horace had said goodnight, were uneasy.

To Mr. Ellis the Contessina admitted privately: 'For *them*, of course, it is heaven's blessing! Much earlier Hugh took me into his confidence.'

'Oh he did, did he?' Mr. Ellis was still smarting from the anxiety caused by that gentleman's fancied predilection for the Contessina—and now Sondes was about to interrupt the Villa's pleasant routine in another way.

'Yes, he's been in love with Rhoda for ten years—hopelessly, helplessly.'

'Ten years,' Mr. Ellis observed critically, 'is quite a time.' He remained astonished, as ever, at the ardour of the Contessina's voice, although her fervent manner no longer embarrassed him—in fact Mrs. Betterton-Best's now seemed somewhat prosaic by comparison. He felt he was changing and it gave him a sense of freedom. He, a northerner was becoming addicted to this southern intensity—life, he had to

admit, would be flat without it now. 'Quite a time,' he repeated, relegating Sondes' progress with that of the tortoise.

'Ah, yes, indeed—we are glad for them that an advance has been made . . . are we not? Yet it is also sad for us. Rhoda may say kindly: *do not go*, but you and I are now the odd men out, is it not so?'

'True enough,' Mr. Ellis agreed, noting with another sort of surprise the texture of her golden-brown skin against the crisp white linen of her dress . . . egg-shell yet translucent. He did not often find himself so near her nowadays. 'But the position is different for you. Mrs. Betterton-Best looks on you as a younger sister. You must not be hasty in decision.'

'Ah, but I must,' the Contessina lowered her voice. 'Rhoda does not know this yet—but Hugh told me that if she accepted him, he would marry her by special licence at once.'

'After ten years,' Mr. Ellis remarked, 'he seems in something of a hurry.'

'But what admirable firmness, what inspired decision *now*! You will see, he will carry all before him.'

'After ten years,' Mr. Ellis repeated judiciously, 'it is perhaps time.'

Earnestly her lustrous eyes gazed at him. 'We must have compassion on him,' she said. 'There are those of course who are decisive from the start.'

Calmly Mr. Ellis returned her gaze. 'Aye,' he said dryly, 'those who know from the start when a situation is beyond them. A man can see the sun, or the evening star but these belong to another world for all that.'

Confidentially the Contessina nodded: 'Doubtless he felt that—but how foolish to lose so many years. Tragic for both of them. After such delay I will confess that I did not expect Hugh to propose to Rhoda quite so soon. All at once he must have found courage—and taken her by surprise.'

'Many a battle is won by surprise attack,' Mr. Ellis conceded, wondering how on earth he could change this unsuitable subject. He and Sondes were becoming inextricably involved—

Suddenly, to his stupefaction, the Contessina leant forward, and nipped his tortoise-shell spectacles off his nose.

Astonishment bereft him of words—he found himself blinking blindly at a white blur in a green gloom.

Then he heard Ludmilla exclaim on a note of wonder:

‘And to think I ever felt nervous of *you*—my gentle dear!’

The next instant, she had leant forward again in their leafy bower and kissed him on the mouth.

So swift, so incredible was this kiss that it had a totally unexpected effect on Mr. Ellis. It struck him as comical—something that might happen to anyone in the rough and tumble of blind-man’s buff.

With surprising precision in his green gloom he gripped her shoulders, and repaid the kiss with interest.

‘For pity’s sake,’ he said, ‘don’t drop my glasses!’

‘Never, never!’ she assured him, as if this frolic were the most natural thing in the world, ‘Let me put them back—my clever darling!’

In this simple fashion, and without the slightest embarrassment, or any proposal, Mr. Ellis found himself betrothed. To his own enormous relief, his temerity had been taken for granted.

Rhoda herself at once dashed off the announcement to *The Times*. It might have been a joke:

‘I’m determined that if the Duchess sues anyone for alienation of affection, it shall be you, James Blair Ellis. . . .’

Mr. Wotherspoon was the first to see the announcement at Cholmondeley Chambers, as it was not everyone there who took *The Times*, and Mr. Simms had, as usual, proved as close as a clam.

The effect on the residents can only be described as dynamic. Mrs. Betterton-Best was their first thought. After all her procrastination, the way in which she’d played fast and loose, this was humiliation, abject, complete. Mr. Wotherspoon next verified the Contessina in the Almanach de Gotha. She was genuine. They were proud of Mr. Ellis. Retiring he might be, but, as was waggishly remembered by Mr. Gedge of Gamages—still waters run deep. . . .

The first night that the Contessina and Mr. Ellis dined with Mr. Simms at Cholmondeley was an occasion.

Later, everyone met her in the lounge, and all were charmed.

On departure, she had actually laid her hand on that weasel Muspratt's arm, and said: 'Do not forget—if you are ever in a difficulty in the kitchen, I shall be happy to come and cook.'

Those at the top knew how to unbend—this was typical of royalty. When had Mrs. Betterton-Best ever dined with Mr. Simms at the Chambers? True, she too was now engaged to be married—but to a Mr. Sondes that no one had ever heard of . . . Seemingly the four of them were to continue living at the Villa—so Mr. Simms had at last admitted. It had certainly been a year . . . and no mistake.

And the glorious heatwave summer proceeded to outlast September.

October proved one of the warmest ever known. The year was resting on its laurels . . . its glories a leisurely departing, with birds' song at the Villa rising and falling in sudden fountains of melody—the only elegiac note that of the robin with its smouldering breast. Towards the end of the month there came another hint of autumn, 'a vintage crispness in the air.

Then in November a wild gale brought four inches of snow while the trees were still in thick leaf—

'I've never seen anything like it,' Rhoda exclaimed from the terrace. 'In a dry year I thought the leaves fell early.'

'No, no,' Mr. Ellis assured her as they swept off the snow together, 'in a dry autumn the trees tend to shed their leaves late—the cause of the fall is the swelling of the buds that will replace them next year. This sees the end of a heatwave the like of which we may never know again.'

She laughed. 'But we're quite ready to let it go—aren't we? Enough's as good as a feast.'

And later after dinner, it was pleasant for Rhoda to draw the curtains while Ludmilla played, Sondes smoked, and Mr. Ellis overhauled his fishing-flies for that holiday with Ludmilla in Scotland next spring.

Opening his wallet for a small piece of pasteboard which he thought was there, he drew it out—and only then recognized it as the text given him in the park last May, no . . . a lifetime ago.

Seated now in this stately, gracious room he read it again:

Joshua 1 verse 3: *Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread that have I given unto you.*

And now, in humility and gratitude he was following the final admonition on the card: *Think about this.*

As he silently replaced it in his wallet, Rhoda said:

'Although the Duchess never answered Ludmilla's letter, I can't help wondering how she is getting on.'

'Much as usual, I believe,' Ellis replied.

Rhoda was surprised. 'Have you heard?'

'Well, now . . . I wrote her fairly recently,' he said. 'I told her that Ludmilla and I would have a short holiday in Scotland this spring, but that we were saving a longer period to come and give her a hand at the harvest next summer.'

Sondes shook his head. 'By next summer there will be fresh ferment there. This time the financiers will back Mussolini.'

Ellis smiled. 'No one will hinder the hay-making, you'll find.'

'Of course they won't! Hugh, you're far too suspicious—it's enough to bring on another war. Has the Duchess answered?'

Ludmilla nodded. 'She answered James's letter, although she's never written to me.'

'But what on earth did she say? You simply must tell us.'

'She told me to go to the devil,' Ellis said tranquilly, 'and that's where we're going—next summer.'

Ludmilla was laughing . . . she had been playing snatches from Gilbert and Sullivan—they were in a frivolous mood. Tenderly Rhoda reflected that Ludmilla always chimed to perfection. In small or significant matters she had a precious gift for harmonising—

And then without warning, to Rhoda's dismay, Ludmilla struck some sombre, rippling chords . . . waves of music were resounding like breakers on a distant beach—

At any concert when this happened, she was forced to slip out till it ended . . . but now, even as she moved to rise, Ludmilla turned and said:

'Rhoda, I sing this for you.'

With a frozen smile Rhoda sank back in her chair, transfixed in her neurosis. She would have to sit it out. How had Ludmilla known that she meant to leave? How had she guessed? Why had her friend forced this endurance test upon her? Mercifully both men beside them were oblivious.

But as this cold sweat broke upon her, the music's rhythm

altered, the rippling of the waves grew lighter—Ludmilla had begun to sing a spiritual:

Michael, row the boat ashore, halleluiah!

Never had her voice pealed forth like this before—each note jubilee.

*Jordan's river is chilly and cold
Chills the body but not the soul
Sister help to trim the sails, halleluiah!*

Time was shaking the events of existence in a painful kaleidoscope, but for a moment Rhoda's vision steadied, and, as she sweated it out, she saw the pattern in peace.

*The river is deep and the river is wide,
Milk and honey on the other side,
Michael, row the boat ashore, halleluiah!*

As the last chord passed into silence, she said tonelessly: 'All safely home now, Ludmilla.'

The younger woman turned her compassionate face upon her, and slowly smiled: 'Yes, my dear, long, long ago.'

Rhoda glanced at Hugh—she hoped that he had not noticed anything.

He was smoking calmly . . . or was it inscrutably? He was rather like the Sphinx on the parapet—but how thankful she was that he was there. Through him her autumn afternoon had lengthened to the semblance of a long summer's day, and she would be eternally grateful to him. . . .

That was in November, with the snow heavy on the freak foliage of the park—

By December of this incredible year, the heatwave had revived, and the twenty-seventh proved the warmest December day for over half a hundred years.

On that date preparations began at the Villa for a buffet-supper to be held on New Year's eve for the residents of Cholmondeley Chambers.

'I can't imagine why I didn't think of a party for them before,' Rhoda told Sondes in her slap-happy way. 'It was Horace who gave me the idea.'

As every invitation had been accepted, she was still com-

pletely oblivious of the hostility, the stern and concentrated disapproval of Cholmondeley! For James Ellis's sake alone the Chambers had decided as one man to go. . . .

An orchestra was already engaged to play in the inner hall—and, at midnight, 1921 would be sped, and the year 1922 blazoned forth. Mr. Hislop had arranged the programme—traditional rather than classical he graciously agreed. Numbers such as the Radetsky March, and Ponchieli's Dance of the Hours would be varied by Viennese waltzes—with Old Comrades to introduce the robust Scottish airs which must precede Auld Lang Syne. He knew what the Chambers liked . . . Maple also sent a man to hang garlands for the occasion—without damage to the walls. Ludmilla and Hetty prepared the buffet, which proved to be a banquet. The peerless Jessie waited, and her husband Mr. Muntz, the chemist from Chalk Farm, helped Miss Nevill to dispense; while Mr. and Mrs. Gatty held the fort in the kitchen, where Mrs. Gatty's sister from Primrose Hill acted as reinforcements. The district might be said to have turned out to do Cholmondeley Chambers proud.

Most of the forty residents walked across the park, but Mr. Wotherspoon came in a taxi, wearing a dinner jacket. Providentially, Mr. Simms had warned Mr. Sondes of this possibility, and he likewise had assumed his, but Mr. Ellis had remained in a lounge suit like the rest of the Chums—one of Mr. Steel's more sober suitings.

From start to finish the evening went with a swing. No one recognized Mrs. Betterton-Rest as charming Mrs. Hugh Sondes, and everyone felt at home when they saw the Hislops. Mr. Wotherspoon remained most favourably impressed, although the party which began as sedately as a Church social ended a good deal more hilariously after one in the morning—and that a Sunday too! Mr. Muspratt himself was present, nagged at intervals by a fear (later justified) that Finnigan the night-porter would get drunk in his absence. The food was afterwards voted second-to-none, the drinks lavish, the Villa itself an eye-opener. And James Ellis's wife was declared to be much more Cholmondeley Chambers' idea of the world's sweetheart than any Mary Pickford. Mr. Sondes also met with everyone's approval, not only for the beneficial effect he'd had

on Mrs. Betterton-Best, but because he seemed to have quite a grasp of current affairs. But perhaps Mr. Simms had been the biggest surprise of all to the Chambers—padding about the Villa, on first-name terms, as if he were one of the family. Nothing that Mr. Simms had said or done had led anyone to expect this . . . in a way they were beginning to feel as proud of him as they were of Mr. Ellis.

And when the time came to go, Mrs. Sondes told them that in summer there was to be a garden-party, but long before that when anyone felt like a stroll, or a breath of fresh air, they were to come along and enjoy the garden. No one would disturb them there. One of the summer-houses belonged to Mr. Simms—he would show them around. If they didn't take her at her word—and she looked straight at Mr. Muspratt as she spoke—she wouldn't believe that they had been as happy as they said tonight.

A fleet of cars, by special arrangement, took the forty residents back to Baker Street—each guest looking forward. . . .

A fierce shower of rain caught the four hosts as they stood outside on the doorstep, waving farewell . . . it shone on their brows, and sparkled in their hair until the last car vanished.

'The first of the deluge,' Sondes prophesied. 'Well, we must expect it after such a period of heat. The rains will probably be unparalleled now.'

'But what a summer it was,' Rhoda cried, 'oh, a vintage year!'

'Yes,' Ludmilla took her husband's arm, 'God be thanked for it!'

Smiling, Mr. Ellis reminded them all: 'The year of the yield. . . .'

